TRAILS TO TWO MOONS

ROBERT WELLES RITCHIE

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A full half minute before smoke jetted from the barrel; the bullet struck many yards too short.
FRONTISPIECE. *See page* 13.

TRAILS TO TWO MOONS

BY

ROBERT WELLES RITCHIE

WITH FRONTISPIECE BY

FRANK SPRADLING

BOSTON
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A NOVEL OF THE BIG COUNTRY

CHAPTER I

THE day Old Man Ring, the sheepman of Teapot Creek, rode to Two Moons with news of importance, Original Bill Blunt, inspector for the Stockmen's Alliance, fared over the illimitable face of the Big Country at his duty.

His duty was simple: A range inspector protected his employers from theft. This meant anything from reading a burnt brand on a yearling's flank to matching shot by shot, at any and all odds, with thieves. A dull day was one wherein the inspector convinced some raw nester from Missouri that every fat steer happening to pass his claim was not meat divinely sent to still the mouths of a clamorous brood in his ten-by-twelve cabin. It was a cardinal day which saw him flat behind the belly of his horse stretched head to ground

— and with hot lead whimpering low, while behind the cut bank of yonder coulee picked marksmen of Zang Whistler's gang were coolly engaging to kill while their comrades ran off the stolen stock.

Original Bill's life was one of variety; it was ebullient and replete with unpremeditated climaxes. Withal, the life of his choosing.

He was of the cattle clan, — born to it in that day when every youth in Texas looked forward to riding the trail with the longhorns, just as the Gloucester and New Bedford boy of the heroic age of sail looked through schoolhouse windows to high harbor spars. The chivalry of the cattle clan had been bred in him by long hours on night herd, by the harrowing moments of stampede in a thunderstorm, the rollicking fellowship of the round-up.

Puncher, trail boss, outfit boss and owner; all four grades of the cattle clan's hierarchy had he passed; its wild, free code was his accolade. In this evil day when barbed wire crept across the free range and a meaner race of sheep herders and their voracious bands was come to dispute with his own people right to what had always been theirs by preëmption, Original Bill Blunt took his place on the cov-

ering line of the Great Retreat. A sense of duty, of loyalty to the order that was passing, placed him there. Certain peculiar qualifications, such as a watch-spring movement of hand to holster, a deadly aim and courage passing ordinary made him a competent inspector, — the most competent in all the Big Country. His name was known from Platte Crossing to the Musselshell.

Of smaller stature than the average man, bowed as to legs through a life on horseback, Original's arresting feature was a chest rounded as a wine tun by the great winds he 'd ridden against and the wild, free life of the range. Endurance passing ordinary was spelled by this torso. His head was small by comparison, thatched heavily with coal black hair. A smooth face was all broken into curious sectors by innumerable wind wrinkles. Black eyes had a disconcertingly steady gaze.

Original rode freely but with an occasional eye to the ground for certain tracings and markings, the clay-stained bottom of an overturned pebble, a stalk of Jimson weed still green but broken. Unconsidered trifles such as any one not of the Big Country might very well fail to see, but telling a rounded story to

the trailer. As he rode he crooned to himself — and to Tige, his little cutting horse, who was always an appreciative listener — a mournful ballad of the Black Hills:

For cute little Two Bears or Commanche Bills;
They 'll lift your back hair in them dreary Black Hills.

He sang because the trail was plain, because it carried to him intelligence he eagerly sought and there was every chance trouble lay ahead.

So he descended from the high lands round Bad Water and came into the valley of the Teapot, a rough and tumble stream dropping straight down from the Spout, back in the Broken Horns. The dim trail he followed cut through some rough land, over a ford and up the tortuous alleys of coulees straight for a ranch house and corral set on the edge of hay-fields. Before he came to the ranch house Original made a detour up a broad draw and drew rein at the rough poplar bars of a smaller corral, — an inclosure not more than twenty feet square neatly hidden away in an alder thicket. Four yearling calves in the corral eyed him askance, shifting restlessly after the silly fashion of their kind.

The horseman's trained eye picked out, even at a distance, burnt hair lines on their flanks, crude jobs with a running iron. He laughed shortly, turned his horse and pushed on to the log-built ranch house. Dropping carelessly from the saddle, he bridle-tied Tige to the ground and walked to the open door. A girl answered his knock on the slab frame.

Her appearance in the sun-washed doorway, with the dark interior of the log house for a background, was a little startling. Startling because of the vivid white and gold of her, — milk-white the full arms bared almost to shoulders; milk-white, with a carnation stripe on lips and morning blush on cheeks, her face. And above the brow the glow and glory of pale dandelion; where her hair dropped in a single thick braid over one shoulder it reflected against her round throat the color of mellow bellflowers. Crisp, like those golden fruits, crisp and inviting was her beauty. Only the eyes repelled. They were blue and cold as deep fiord water, sleepy slow in glance, innocent of all feminine tricks of coquetry. The brooding fatalism of the north countries lay behind their large irises. Yes, and something of the sultry anger of a spoiled child.

Original swept off his hat and stood a bit abashed under the girl's steady, impersonal stare.

"Ole Man Ring lives here, I take it," he began tentatively. She curtly nodded.

"Maybe he's out riding round somewheres?" Original ventured after a moment's pause in which no invitation to enter — cardinal courtesy of the Big Country — was forthcoming.

"He's gone to Two Moons," she said. She was standing with arms wide and hands braced against the rough frame of the door. The sunlight cut from the dark background a silhouette of her figure, all blue-gingham clad and cinctured loosely at the waist. A figure of lithe strength, more masculine than suggestive of womanly softness, albeit gloriously rounded. Her pose, blocking the doorway and with competent arms thrown out, emphasized the absence of welcome in her eyes. Original read the subtle hint of challenge in both pose and eyes and was piqued.

"My name is Blunt — inspector for this range. If he was at home I was aiming to ask your father some particular questions, Miss — ah — Miss ——"

"My father don't know any cowmen," Hilma Ring answered shortly.

"Never too late to get acquainted," he smiled. There was something disarming and ingenuous in Original's smile which on occasion had carried farther than a .45 bullet, but the Norsk stolidity in these blue eyes blasted his best efforts.

"My father and I pick and choose the folks we know." Hilma gave the insult in a studied drawl; her chin was tilted out from the firm round of her throat, and blue-black eyes looked out from beneath lowered lids like the eyes of a panther firming herself for the spring. Original still smiled, but with the lips alone.

"Well, you picked a good one when you chose Zang Whistler of Teapot Spout," he retorted hardily. "He 's one of the politest outlaws and all-round bad men we have in our midst, which is saying something."

Hilma made no answer save through her eyes, which flashed like feldspar in the sun. She took a backward step as if to close the door in the visitor's face.

"An' I take it I did n't miss meeting Zang Whistler right here in your dooryard by a very long time," Original pursued with studied cold-

ness. "Those yearlin' calves, now, they 've still got the lather on 'em from hard runnin'."

This roused her. What knowledge was this stranger advertising by veiled hints? The prick of danger loosed her tongue:

"I don't know what you 're talking about — Zang Whistler — calves. If you have any questions to ask I can answer them as well as my father."

Just a flicker of triumph about Original's mouth. He plumped his challenge at her before she could recover the vantage of silence:

"Zang Whistler rode up here not more 'n an hour ago, driving a bunch of four yearlin' calves. The calves are wearing a skillet-of-snakes brand over their rightful S O Bar, which is so new you can smell the burnt hide. After Zang penned those burnt calves in that tidy little corral you have down in the draw — you directing him from the back of a smallish horse with one skelped hoof — you and him rode up to the house, and Zang sat his horse right here," Original pointed to three tiny damp spots on the dooryard's hardened 'dobe, "while you gave him a goord of water. Then he rode off yonder to Teapot Spout to join his merry companions."

Hilma had unconsciously lifted one hand away from the door frame to bring its fingers playing about her lips while Original delivered this smooth flow of magic. Now she burst forth in hot anger:

"I always heard you cow inspectors were crawling Indians, dodging and twisting in the grass to spy on folks. If you saw all this why did n't you come right out and talk about it then? Afraid of Zang Whistler's gun?" This last shot with a wintry smile.

"Got me wrong, Miss Corntossel," he teased, no spite, but a secret attempt at provocation registering in his voice. "I saw all this, as you say, on the ground. Tracks tell no lies. Zang Whistler rides a horse with one notched hoof; he 's fair in love with that little horse and won't give him up, howbe it leaves a wide trail everywhere. A calf with a healing brand limps on the leg he 's favoring; that 's easy to see in any middlin' soft ground. Anyway, I mostly find cattle with sore brands clustering round the tracks Zang Whistler's horse makes. It 's a funny habit they have."

She stood irresolute for the space of two breaths looking up to the smiling eyes under the shadowing hat brim. Then without hurry

she stepped back into the house and closed the door. Original heard a bar sliding into place behind the heavy slabs. He gazed at the shut door with mingled amusement and chagrin; the situation had not been at all distasteful despite the girl's churlishness. That he set down as but of a part with the bad manners of the sheep people. But the chill glory of her face upon which the heavy rope of hair cast a reflected golden sheen! Girls with looks like that were scarce upon the range.

Tige turned to the pressure of a knee and trotted down to the scars of the creek bank behind the ranch house through which the questing trail had led. This track Original pursued up the secret draw to the hidden corral where the stolen yearlings were penned. He dropped the bars and rode in among them.

"Hi! Yip — yip!" The calves milled about the pen foolishly, then plunged out through the opening; wise little Tige nosed and nudged them into a close core of galloping flesh. Down the draw and on to where the Teapot spread its waters wide for a ford Original drove the bunch.

A clean, sharp crack sounded from over where the cliff of the coulee lifted above the

scars of winter freshets. A puff of dust kicked up twenty feet or more ahead of the foremost calf. Original whipped his eyes to the right. He saw the clean, chiseled shape of the girl he had just left against the raw blue of the sky on the brink of the gorge a hundred and fifty yards away. She was mounted on a scrubby horse. Even as he looked she raised her rifle again and covered him. A full half minute before smoke jetted from the barrel; the bullet struck many yards too short.

Just as the first calf plunged into the shallows of the ford Original turned in his saddle and with elaborate gesture of politeness lifted his hat. He made a sweeping bow which carried him low over his saddle horn. Then he suddenly reined Tige to his haunches, whirled him about to face the distant figure on the coulee bank and held him steady. Horse and rider presented a fair, wide mark.

Original saw the girl drop the rifle down to her side, eject the empty shell, then slowly lift the shining lance of light once more to her shoulder. Her vivid golden head tipped as she laid her eye along the sights. He sat moveless, smiling, curiously stirred by the deliberate workings of a murder impulse. It flashed

upon him that the girl behind that rifle was different from any girl he had ever met. She was a regular stinger — that is what she was — a stinger.

Just as light struck from the far-away barrel lanced itself fair in the man's eyes the trigger was pressed. High over his head the bullet sang. Once more Original swept his hat in a mocking arc, then turned and dashed across the ford to round the scattering yearlings into a traveling unit. He did not even look back. No more shots came. But as he rode the range inspector chuckled deep down in his throat.

"Bluffed, by criminy — bluffed! Original, boy, I reckon the pot 's yours."

For Original Bill Blunt knew that even poor shooting could not excuse that last shot so far over his head. A hand had elevated the rifle barrel at the last saving quarter second.

CHAPTER II

A SADDLE-COLORED horse, dust streaked and weary, topped the long rise of the Poison Spider Divide and, willing enough to obey the slight tug at bridle, shambled to a halt on the crest. The rider, a shrunken figure in overall blue under a flapping black hat, straightened a bit in his seat and looked down on the town of Two Moons in the hill pocket. Always in the Big Country there is this pleasurable prick of surprise when the last billowing divide of an interminable succession falls below horse's hoofs to reveal destination. After thirty miles of desolation — ranked buttes like organ pipes shooting into the blue; bald mesas; leprous waves of alkali hills — first sight of town crashes on the dulled senses like smitten iron.

Shabby, both horse and rider. No pride of the sleek-limbed cutting horse, aristocrat of the cow outfit's *remuda,* showed in the beast's slack neck and limp ears; in his dull eye no spark of deviltry awaiting opportunity to flare

into open revolt. Christian — for that was his name — was earth-born in a land where the horse is king. The man who rode him was plebeian, loutish even in the careless sag of his overalls tucked into square-toed boots, the hump of his collar high round his ears. His wizened face was all fallen into hollows and crevasses beneath protuberant cheek bones and outstanding ears; skin above the scraggy gray beard baked a pipestone red; blue eyes which never cleansed themselves of dazedness. His features seemed to be set in a perpetual substrata of frost.

This was Old Man Ring, the sheepman of Teapot Creek come to Two Moons to tell the sheriff of Broken Horn something important.

Never before in his drab life of grubbing had Old Man Ring anything important to tell anybody. Never, even, had he been important in himself except in a limited way and that a bread-winning way — a hard-necessity way. The Big Country round about distinguished him above his fellow sheepmen only because he was the father of Hilma Ring. And Hilma Ring was counted a peach — a loo-loo.

"You, Christian!" Old Man Ring laid blame for the halt on his horse and querulously

jerked at the bit. Christian sighed and took the down grade at what long years of service had established as a courtesy trot. They drew nigh the Thirst Cutter Saloon, outpost of Two Moons' convivial welcome. Old Man Ring turned yearningly in his saddle and caught a whiff of ardent spirits wafted out from swinging screen doors. But, no; he had something important to tell the sheriff of Broken Horn. "You, Christian!" Again a yank at the bridle. Main Street received them.

In those days before the railroad Two Moons was a scrawny town even in the full flush of its boom. Seat of the new county of Broken Horn, but recently cut out of the anarchy of No Man's Land and not yet smoothly geared to the machinery of law, Two Moons was scarce two decades beyond that dim historic time when its site was that of an Indian massacre. Just a plot of buffalo grass where the Poison Spider and Prairie Dog converge.

When Pack Saddle Owens hauled logs down from Piney Cañon and built his general store Till Driscoll was trail boss of the pioneer herds of longhorns up from Texas. Till stocked his outfits from Pack Saddle's store, and another store sprang up, and another. So came Two

Moons — a cattlemen's town — to squat down in the hill pocket in the heart of the Big Country; the saw-tooth range of the Broken Horns behind, and before it more square miles of fat range land than a man dared reckon by hundreds.

A cattlemen's town it remained as long as freight wagons had to haul one hundred and seventy miles up from the nearest reach of the Union Pacific — as long as the bunch grass grew fat and no man stretched wire between Denver and the Dominion Line. But a new railroad rocketed down in a north-and-south slash through the wilderness, and freight wagons had to haul only forty miles. A stage appeared. Two Moons began to change.

A government land office opened on Main Street. Then, as flies to the honey pot, came straddling and stumbling across the bad lands, first the unlovely hordes of the homesteaders, "nesters", in the vernacular of the cattle clan; then the sheepmen with their devastating flocks to contest the range, which the nesters did not fence, with the cattlemen, who abominated sheep a little more than they did barbed wire. There was an upheaval in the town's social life. Where one saloon had served the boys in from

the fall round-up, five, six — a dozen must needs mushroom along Main Street. And in the saloon, as nowhere else, caste lines were laid down in increasing bitterness. The Capitol, over whose bar Till Driscoll's 2800-pound steer spread his six-foot span of horns as a sign for the faithful, was exclusively the drinking place of the cattle clan; a sheep herder put his foot on dynamite when he eased it against the Capitol's rail. By the same code a cowpuncher never visited the Granger or the Homesteader unless his credit at the Capitol was utterly depleted; then he gave his patronage to the pariah barkeepers with an air of condescension.

Main Street, as Old Man Ring saw it this day of his coming to town, was a block wide and four long. False fronts of tin and wood reared themselves gawkishly over one and two-story pine stores. Here and there a lot given over to tumbleweed gaped like a missing tooth. To right and left of Main Street houses of the townspeople — for the most part tarpapered boxes extravagantly painted in ocher and blues — trailed down to hide among the cottonwoods along the banks of the streams, where some Crow families had their tepees.

Dominating the whole clutter of Two Moons was the new courthouse and jail at the far end of Main Street, a prideful extravagance of brick hauled at untold dollars of tax money by freight wagons from Lost Soldiers, on the railroad.

Old Man Ring jogged down Main Street straight to the courthouse. Tying Christian to the horse rail, he entered and blundered his way to the door marked Sheriff. Within the bearer of tidings found Sheriff Red Agnew, a Viking with a flaming beard cascading down to the charm on his watch chain; a man of fearsome mien, whose eye seemed constantly searching the waistcoat of a quondam visitor to select the tidiest place to put a bullet. Red Agnew had been elected to the shrievalty of Broken Horn largely on his looks; he seemed designed of nature to be a sheriff. Moreover, he was the sheepmen's candidate; sheep money had financed his campaign, the cattle clan said.

Without preliminaries Old Man Ring launched into the mission which had brought him thirty miles from his home ranch on Teapot Creek. He spoke with a burring of the gutturals which thirty years away from his native Denmark had not sufficed to erase:

"Jed Monk on Teapot five miles below my place is murdered. The Killer, he does it."

Bang! Sheriff Agnew's heels slid from desk edge to floor. His huge body straightened itself alertly. "Murder!" he echoed.

"Yes, murdered," Old Man Ring placidly repeated. His frost-bound features changed by not so much as a wrinkle. He was standing on one foot like a tired horse; the toe of the free boot kicked languidly against the heel of the other. "It is the Killer does it because I saw him."

"Where — when?" the Sheriff snapped.

"Last night 'bout sundown when I ride by Bad Water Breaks. I look for that white-faced mulley cow of mine which makes always to go by her calf down in Jed Monk's corral which I sold to him. I hear a leetle shot — bim! — away off near Jed Monk's house, and I ride there. So I am going through the breaks — 'nother leetle shot — bim! — this time leetle closer. I cut across Bad Water Breaks in a hurry and soh ——" Old Man Ring interrupted his narrative to rummage for a bandanna and blow his nose. He was calm as a graveyard monument.

"So when I come to the road I see a man

there on a black horse. He sees me and he turns right away over the top of that leetle hill. But I know him. Before, in this town, I have seen him. His name is —— " he bent toward Agnew's ear and whispered a name. The sheriff's eyes narrowed and a fold of skin ridged the cleft above his nose.

" Then I find Jed Monk there in the road 'bout half mile from his house. Two bullets; one through his head, one by the third button of his shirt. And on his head —— "

" Same mark as the others? " Sheriff Agnew put in quickly.

" On his head, where it lies a leetle by the side, is a stone 'bout as big as this," Old Man Ring marked off his thumb with fingers clamped below the first joint, " 'bout as big as this, that stone lying there on his head."

" The stone on the head — yes, the stone on the head," muttered Agnew. " And you saw him — you got a good look at him, so 's you could go before a grand jury and swear to the name of the Killer? "

" By dam, I saw him gude! " The withered sheepman was roused to his first enthusiasm by the prospect of playing center stage; of appearing before that mysterious body called

the grand jury and swearing a man's neck into a noose.

"Come over to Strayman's office and tell him what you've told me," the Sheriff commanded. He heaved himself up from his chair and led the way down a corridor to the office of District Attorney Strayman. To the prosecutor Old Man Ring repeated this tale of a murder almost in identical words. Orpheus C. Strayman, a little man, all fuss and fury, cracked three knuckles in quick succession at the news Ring had brought in from Teapot.

"Got him, Agnew!" he exploded. "Same man — five murders — stone on the head of each victim. Got him cinched! I'll call a grand jury ——"

"Can you get a grand jury that is right?" the Sheriff interrupted. Like him, the prosecutor was by a narrow squeak the successful candidate of the new element come to Broken Horn County to oppose the barony of the cattle clan. In answer Strayman gravely lowered one eyelid.

"That's up to you, Agnew." Then as his nimble mind leaped ahead to grapple with future contingencies: "There'll be a fight, Sheriff, a devil of a fight! This Killer, he's

working for the cow interests and I can prove it. Why does he mark the head of each man he kills with a stone? Just to show the people paying him he 's earning his money, by God!

"Run down the list. Old Hard Winter Peters, who ran his sheep over on south prong of Beaver; he homesteaded on the only water hole in twenty miles. First to go, with a quartz pebble laid between his eyes. Jay North up in Rainhole; the K Cross outfit claimed he was branding their mavericks and there was hot talk between them. Number Two for North! I tell you, we got to make an example in the courts — got to make an example, or the cattlemen 'll have every homesteader and sheepman from here to No Wood throwing up their hands and dusting back East."

Strayman had worked himself into a fearful passion; his cowlick was roached up like a fighting rooster's crest, and his eyes were beady. The less emotional Agnew turned to Ring:

"Told anybody what you know — this murder business?"

"I tell my girl Hilma. She knows everything I know," the informer from Teapot answered defensively as if he expected his testi-

mony might somehow be invalidated by this indiscretion.

"All right, keep your mouth shut," the Sheriff warned. "We don't want every cowpuncher in town to know what we got up our sleeve. Now, Strayman, when 'll you want this man to testify?"

"Um — let me see. This is Tuesday; be here in my office at nine o'clock Friday morning, Ring. And remember what the Sheriff says: Not a word to anybody — not even to yourself. Friday — yes, Friday — so long!"

Old Man Ring went blinking out into the sun. He rode Christian down to the Fashion Stables and there arranged for the beast's board overnight. It was not to be doubted Christian approved his master's decision to remain in Two Moons until the following day; even though the drab little horse could not "see some of the boys", the near presence of a fiery bronco who kicked his stall to flinders during the night gave Christian the feeling he was enjoying metropolitan life.

As for Old Man Ring, after he had stoked to repletion at the Rhinoceros Eating House he ambled over to the Homesteaders and had a drink. At the Granger he had another.

Also, he met friends. It was the sunset hour and all Main Street was blocked into indigo and pale lemon by fardels of waning light flung down from the crest of the Broken Horns. An hour for confidences.

"I was yust riding by the Bad Water Breaks," Old Man Ring was saying, back to bar and arms spread along the rail expansively, "when I hear a leetle shot — bim! — away off near Jed Monk's house ——"

Quick night fell and along the black channel of Main Street splashes of light sprayed out from saloon doors. Dark shapes of men waded through these fountains of light. Men met and one said to another: "Have you heard about it? Ye-ah, another murder. C'm on over to the Cloud's Rest and listen to Old Man Ring tell about it. He knows who done it."

"Soh I find Jed Monk like I tell you," Old Man Ring, firm as a jack pine upon his feet and with the liquor in him showing only by an increased dazedness in his eyes, was repeating for the twentieth time. Something of an oratorical quality had come into his voice. "And on his head, where it lies a leetle on the side, there is a stone 'bout as big as this ——"

Two Moons, alive, stirred by the tale of

another murder done, found itself restless under vague premonition. A spirit of portent, raw and rough as the temper of the Big Country round about, rode the night wind. Along the black spine of the Broken Horns fluttered the brooding fires of heat lightning.

CHAPTER III

Hilma Ring was not emotional. The petty reflexes of thought and action that come to women of finer fiber, of more pampered lives — to your idle beauty of the flowered boudoir — were unknown to her. Impulse and emotion were with her primitive, direct, unaffected by any reaction of sensitive nerves. The springs of her life were elemental as that secret force which each year covers the face of the Big Country with lusty verdure. When, after that last shot and that derisive farewell by the one coolly daring it, Hilma turned to ride back to her house she was conscious of but a single response to the events of the past few moments, cold anger. Anger at the impudent stranger who had driven off the yearlings in the face of her fire; anger more particularly at herself. Why had her hand tipped up the head on the barrel's end that instant her finger pulled the

trigger? Why, when she had every intention of shooting to kill when the smiling face of that cowman looked at her between the prongs of the buckhorn — why had she let him live? Hilma did not find an answer to this question. Her anger but fed itself on answer denied.

She rode her sorry pony into the corral, unsaddled him and threw him an armful of hay, for the beast was her sole companion in much lonesomeness and there was love between them. Then she carried her rifle to the doorstep and, sitting there, fired many shots at the rusty butt of a tomato can a hundred paces away. Every shot missed and at each miss her anger increased — that curious double anger linking the smiling stranger and her own self for its object. Hilma only stopped her savage practice shooting when the growing clutter of empty shells at her feet suddenly aroused her to the waste. Rifle cartridges cost money; her father would fly into one of his rages when he discovered what she had done. Then they would quarrel; perhaps he would strike her, as he sometimes did, and she would strike back. All that would not be worth while.

Hilma carefully cleaned the rifle, reloaded the chamber; then gathered the empty shells

into her apron and carried them far away from the house to spill them down the steep gorge of the coulee. She returned to her lonesomeness, and her still-gnawing anger.

Lonesomeness had been this girl's portion almost since she could remember. There had been a time — away back there in Minnesota — when there was a mother; but that time was all in the dim forgotten land. Almost the only fact Hilma remembered about her mother was that she was American, and for that the girl was devoutly thankful. That this shadow figure of child memory should have been American instead of Danish had always been to Hilma a sort of investiture of sainthood. Hilma hated the Danish blood in her; she remembered how children had called her "Scowegian." When the mother went — Hilma was six then — the lonesomeness had come. First the lonesomeness of the scrubby farm in the flat lands but with neighbors so near one could see their windmills. Then the greater and more terrible lonesomeness of this vast country, where one looked a hundred miles from the Broken Horns across and across to the Black Hills, where it was a day's ride to a neighbor's house.

Four years now this lonesomeness of the wilderness had been hers, had grown to be the most intimate thing in life. It had stamped an indelible mark on her mind. Hilma Ring, at nineteen, lived solely within herself. She sought sympathy, communion in thought and understanding with no one. Her father was the only person who came near invading this hard barrier of self-sufficiency. Perhaps she loved him; Hilma did not know. More often than not she considered him merely a shrunken little man with a bad temper with whom she must work in order to live. His Danish burr of speech was a dull irritation.

So it was into the selfish sphere of this narrow life that the smiling and impudent stranger had shot, comet-like. Reason enough for Hilma's disliking him. But because he had taunted her with her poor shooting, defied her to kill him if she could, she hated him. Because, too, he was of the cattle clan — that caste deeming itself superior and demanding for itself subservience of all others — she hated him. Hated him, also, because he had run off with four misbranded yearlings which Zang Whistler had left in their secret corral under a working agreement with her father.

The day wore to a purple and carnelian close. Hilma sat in the doorway and watched the riot of the sunset play all along the saw edge of the Broken Horns — the thin blue rim was like the lip of a volcano confining fires of creation. Billows of cathedral light streamed down the flanks of the mountains and out over the great range. The crystal air was a lens focusing into sharp relief dots of pines on the higher ridges, clumps of squatting sage fringing the nearer divides. Heavens paled from rose to lemon yellow and to green.

Against this eerie light the figure of a horseman, at a great distance, appeared black as charcoal.

Just this figure of a horseman visible for a minute against the sky line, then disappearing. Hilma saw it; she watched it with intentness until it was swallowed by the black shadow of a butte. Long she sat, waiting for the tiny silhouette to reappear. The dark came, but the specter of the afterglow did not show itself again. The girl found herself idly wondering about it. That would be on the road to Two Moons where the horseman appeared, — on the road over which her father would be traveling homeward. No ranches lay over there; no

cow outfits were located between Teapot and town. It must be her father, returning.

The girl cooked supper and laid out two plates on the oilcloth-covered table. Supper grew cold; a smell of stale grease and cooling tea filled the long room. The clock with the picture of the Minnesota state capitol on its pendulum case banged out ten. Hilma ate alone.

When she had dried her hands of steaming dishwater she went out to the dooryard and stood a long while listening for the sound of hoofs. A coyote somewhere out in the dark complained dolefully of life's bitterness, but that was the only sound. She moved round the log walls, closing and bolting with stout turn buttons the wooden shutters covering each of the three windows. This was a nightly precaution of hers; just why she did it Hilma never knew. Maybe it was to shut out the great dark. Then she reëntered the house and slipped the heavy oaken bar into place behind the door. The house was hers to possess in lonesomeness.

Mercifully constricted and intimate was this oasis of lamplight in the desert of the night. Just one long room, twenty feet from end wall

to end wall; one door leading to the lean-to kitchen; another through the thin partition of Hilma's own room; a great fireplace of stones and mud bisecting the rear wall. The furnishings were Spartan: A heavy table in the middle of the floor; three homemade chairs with rawhide bottoms; a squatty trunk of blue glazed zinc and chipped lacquer; on the walls four colored lithographs from which the advertising matter had been cut; and a glassed-over print of a Danish king and queen, — the king had quaint old-world whiskers and his royal spouse wore her gown in early Victorian décolletté. Nothing more to look at than this scant inventory. If the mind of one alone tired of reviewing this slender invitation to beguilement there was a huge Bible in the zinc trunk and a pink plush album of atrocious portraits. Also, a doll.

The lonesomeness of the great range came to sit down with Hilma. To-night it was more poignant than usual. The girl's imagination, never obtrusive, began to play in a manner surprising to her, and it centered round the silhouette of the horseman against the green sky. Insensibly her thoughts drifted to Jed Monk, sheepman, and what her father had

journeyed to Two Moons to tell the sheriff concerning the manner of Monk's taking off. The stone on the forehead, — she could see it, could see the unlovely face of their nearest neighbor with a pebble balanced grotesquely just above one lumpish jaw socket. This was very unusual and not a little disturbing. Hilma laid it all to the door of the impudent range inspector, her visitor of the afternoon. As she phrased it aloud — and Hilma always talked her thoughts when she was alone — he had started her thinking. It was not everybody who could start Hilma Ring thinking.

"Fool!" she chided herself, and she undressed and rolled herself in the blankets of her bunk. Sleep would not come. Instead a brooding formless something, which might have been the shape of fear or — had Hilma known it — a messenger of ill from the Norse god Frey, took substance of the dark about her. She shivered. Hours passed.

A noise brought her bounding to her feet by the bunk side. It was a stuttering whinny, and it came from the direction of the corral where the shabby little horse was penned. Hilma stood breathless for many minutes, then native courage pushed through her panic. She

hurried surely through the dark to the fireplace corner where the rifle stood, seized it and threw a shell into the chamber. After a minute spent with ear close to the outer door she pushed back the bar and let the heavy slab door swing inward. Rifle ready, Hilma peered out.

The many-starred night told nothing. Naught there but the dead black shoulders of the mountains, deeper shadows below, and on high a spangled vault which seemed to hum with the energy of its myriad lamps. Hilma went back to bed.

Near noon next day Christian, her father's horse, ambled head down to the corral bars and there stood, resting easily on three legs and patiently waiting to be uncinched. The saddle was empty.

Hilma threw herself on Christian's back and started him at a labored gallop down the road toward Two Moons. Her mood was not one of surprise or consternation; the night had left her expectant, and the return of the riderless horse was but part of fulfillment. So she rode, eyes scanning the hard road ahead and the little swales and buffalo wallows on either side.

She had journeyed perhaps ten miles when a speck on the thin ribbon of dust ahead of her slowly took shape of horse and rider. As she drew near she recognized the tall, gaunt shape and prophet's beard of Uncle Alf, the circuit rider — crazy Uncle Alf, he was known to all the Big Country. Something bulky cumbered the saddle before him and dropped to either side in shapeless, swaying extremities. Uncle Alf recognized her when she was still a distance away. He halted his horse and shot one skinny arm high above his head, the hand wide spread.

"The murderer rising with the light killeth, and in the night is as a thief." His hail came bellowing in deep diapason, — a voice almost terrifying in volume. The circuit rider's eyes showed white under his flapping hat brim; the eyes of Jeremiah they were.

"I heard an angel flying through the midst of heaven, saying with a loud voice, Woe, woe, woe to the inhabiters of earth!" Uncle Alf swept his outstretched arm in a fearsome gesture.

Hilma rode, clear-eyed, close to the evangelist's side and looked down at that which he carried over his saddle horn. It was the body of her father, murdered.

CHAPTER IV

Crazy Uncle Alf was one of God's accidents, in the opinion of Big Country folks. He was deemed a bit touched, but whether by mere mortal infirmity or by some mysterious power beyond ken no man dared speculate. They said he was so all-fired uncertain. Like a sudden bitter wind of winter, he was wont to sweep in from the void of range country, blast souls afraid and pass on. Now he would be summoning Two Moons sinners to repentance; overnight he had quit the town on a borrowed horse, and the following sunset would see him calling blessings on the lonely ranch house, fifty miles away, which he had chosen to harbor and refresh him. In heat and storm Uncle Alf fared over the face of the wilderness, scourging and purging souls with the whips of Pentateuch.

The spirit of the wilderness moved him, even as the holy men of old. Big winds down from

the mountains carried the voice of the Almighty. Signs and portents were spread against the canopy of the stars for his rapt eye. The play of lightning in the core of a storm answered his cry for guidance on his way. The desert's harshness tinctured the evangelist's theology. No denomination or established dogma bound him; his ordination had come direct from God, staying his hand in a moment of blood lust — for so he vaunted his conversion — and sending him on a mission of redemption. Terrible the Mosaic law and the exactions of Jehovah in Uncle Alf's interpretation, and terrible his exposition of them. He could survey a quarter section of hell in a way to bring the most hardened backslider crawling to a temporary seat on the mourners' bench.

A weird, unworldly figure. Taller than most tall men; gaunt as a hound; weathered features all sunken into swales and hummocks about his eyes of a seer; uncut hair and sweep of snowy beard mingling about his ears; thin wrists and shanks sprouting like cypress roots from the vents of his hand-me-down garments. A veritable blasted pine of a man.

There was something in the evangelist's eyes when Hilma rode close enough to see his saddle

burden which showed he had set himself for a wild outburst of grief. None came. The girl looked down at the pitiful bundle; her hand strayed out to touch her father's head. Dark lights lay deep in her eyes when she raised them to Uncle Alf's.

"Where did you find him?" she asked.

"By the roadside just t'other side of Twenty Mile Crick. And right between his eyes ——"

"A little stone," Hilma supplied. "A little stone — yes, I knew." She turned her horse to the homeward stretch.

"The Killer!" Uncle Alf roared in his diapason thunder. "That son of Baal who kills for the cattlemen and marks his pride in blood with a stone. He lies in wait like the thief and the spoiler, and his hand is red in the dawn."

They rode a distance with no further word between them. Hilma was looking off to the mighty battlements of the mountains, warders over her great lonesomeness, — now without respite. The lanky man by her side muttered in his beard. She spoke her thoughts aloud:

"He shot dad because dad knew who he was. Dad rode to Two Moons to tell the sheriff he saw the Killer shoot Jed Monk. I reckon he

— the Killer — knew dad 'd do this and wanted to put him out of the way before he could testify before a court of law."

"'Thou hast not hated blood; even blood shall pursue thee,'" growled Uncle Alf.

"I knew last night this would happen," Hilma continued in a flat monotone. "I saw him against the sky when it was green and he was black. I felt him moving round in the dark. So I knew to-day — I knew ——"

"It was the voice of God what told you to come searching to-day, daughter," the man corrected. "Even as it was His voice come to me in sleep down to Henry Withers' place, saying, 'Rise up, Alpheus; go forth in the dawn and find a murdered man, that ye may comfort the fatherless and become an avenger of blood.'"

That phrase, an avenger of blood, launched the evangelist upon one of his fanatical flights, and he dinned the inexorable law of an eye for an eye. The girl, riding with her eyes on the mountains, stole an occasional glance at the ascetic face of the preacher; his steel-bright eyes fascinated her even as the swift surge of his speech stirred a deep response of primitive passions. For Uncle Alf hurled anathema at

the whole cattle clan — branded the barons of the great range and all their gentry of the cow outfits with the mark of bloodguiltiness. He compared the dominant caste to Pharaoh's hosts and made the small settlers a people in bondage, awaiting but the call of a Moses. Uncle Alf visioned himself in the rôle of deliverer.

"They drive my people from the water fords. They tromp down my people's lambs with their horned cattle, and their murderers lurk in the hedges to destroy the innercent. Bear witness, oh God! They think this here range was guv to them by You exclusive, like You set Adam in the Garden. Your waters and Your flowin' streams belong to no man but them. The strong grasses nussed by Your sun is for their fat steers only. But, God, I hearn You when You says to me out of a cloud, 'Alpheus, rise up and gird up your loins. Take the rifle in your hands, Alpheus,' says You to me, 'and call your people together with rifles in their hands to rise against the Egyptians and confound 'em — lay 'em low and utterly destroy the whole stiff-necked congregation!'"

The white head was tipped far back to bring the beard pointing at the horizon and his rapt

eyes were fixed on the blinding sun. Uncle Alf shot his hands aloft in a gesture of invocation.

"All right, dear God A'mighty, it 'll be my duty an' my pleasure to follow Your directions 'long these lines."

So fared these two — and that pitiful third — through the immensity of the brown and gold desert, under aloof heavens; a world raw from the wheel of the potter. And Hilma Ring drank deep of the grim doctrine of vengeance. At first the preacher's exhortations stirred her only by the sonorousness of word and phrase; his mighty voice played upon her ear as something potent to command. Then insensibly her sluggishness of perception — inheritance from the Danish blood — fell away, and her mind began to leap and tingle to the call of a blood reckoning. All her dull hatred of the cattle clan, hitherto formless and without definite inspiration, was coals for the fiery prophet to breathe upon. She saw herself bereft of a father, not by an individual but by that collective monster of Uncle Alf's conjuring. Not because she loved her father — for Hilma could not be sure she ever had — but because she had a right to a father and this

right had been invaded by the cattle clan, did she give herself to the other's promptings of bitter recompense.

Weightiest thing in the balance of the girl's growing wrath was that they, the cattlemen, through their hired agent had sealed her to the bondage of the great lonesomeness forever and ever. To live at all she must live alone, work the sheep band, grub for dollars to buy flour and bacon. Away out there where the blank sky bends to touch vacant wilderness, where nothing moves except at the stir of winds, where silence lies like a deep sea, there must she live — alone. Alone!

They came to Hilma's house on the crest above Teapot and laid Old Man Ring in his bunk.

"When shall we have the funeral?" Uncle Alf asked over bacon and beans.

"Right away, while you're still here," Hilma answered. "I've got to have somebody round to help. Now that Jed Monk's dead — he was our only neighbor — there's nobody nearer than Zang Whistler and his boys over in the Spout. I reckon it won't be much of a funeral."

She tried to smile, but found the effort some-

how inept. After the meal Uncle Alf took hammer, saw and nails and went down to the shed stable to rip off precious boards and make a coffin. Hilma donned her oldest dress, carried pick and shovel to a flower-blown knoll above the creek and there chose a site for the grave. She was bare-headed; her sleeves rolled up to the shoulders gave the dazzling whiteness of her arms to the sun. Soon the sleazy dress clung to her back with a sweat of toil, and its stretched web undulated to the smooth play of muscles from shoulder to midback.

Zang Whistler found her thus at labor when he rode up. He had been skirting the crest of the opposite divide, two miles and more away, when the dazzle of sunlight on her live gold hair arrested his eye, so he crossed the Teapot to make talk. Hilma looked up at the sound of hoofs; she drew one arm across her forehead to wipe damp strands of hair out of her eyes. Zang Whistler's sweeping bow — and a fetching figure of a horseman he was — was answered by a grave nod. The visitor's careless masculine grace and bold features, a little raffish and devil-may-care, carried no sex challenge to Hilma. She counted men, especially youngish men, merely as a variant of her own

species — queer creatures and a little akin to bull calves in their antics.

"Old Man Ring got you working for him again?" Zang hailed, curbing his pony near the shallow trench wherein the girl stood.

"Yes," Hilma answered, and she squared her shoulders for another pick drive.

"What you digging away up here on the hill — water hole?" the man quizzed laughingly.

"No; grave — his grave." The reply came shortly and with the sweep of the pick point down to shale. Whistler swung from the saddle in an instant and reached to take the pick handle from her. She met his questioning eyes with a curiously objective stare.

"Ole Man Ring dead? What — who did it?"

"The Killer," Hilma answered dully. "The Killer got him when he was coming back from Two Moons. Crazy Uncle Alf 's over yonder to the stable now, tinkering up something to bury him in."

Her story of the shooting was bald and brief. The leader of the Spout gang of blackballed cow-punchers and outlaws heard her through with a growing pucker of wonder in

the corners of his eyes, — wonder at the calm self-possession of this radiant girl.

"Well," he ventured when she had finished, "I suppose you 'll be closing up the outfit and moving to town."

"No, I won't. I got to stick if I want to live. All Dad has is sunk in the sheep. I guess I got to live in a sheep wagon now or starve." She voiced this scope of her future with no shading of protest in her voice. Zang eyed her still more curiously.

"Good girl!" he exclaimed. "Give me that pick and you go 'long back to the house."

Hilma yielded the pick and stepped out of the trench. She sat down, drew off both her heavy shoes and shook dirt from them. Whistler stole a covert glance under his arm at the stockinged ankles, trim and shapely for all their coarse covering. Hilma saw the look, but continued unperturbed to brush bits of shale from her stocking soles. She pulled on her shoes and arose.

"A fresh inspector was here yesterday little while after you left," she said. "He ran off all those yearlin' calves of yours down to the corral and I shot at him. But I missed him," — this admission in a knife-edged stab of bit-

terness. "Name 's Blunt — Bill Blunt." Zang poised the pick over his head and whistled.

"Blunt — Original Bill, eh? You say you shot at him. Lord-ee, Miss Hilma, he did n't go for to shoot at you, now?" Hilma shook her head. "Sho! I had n't oughta set Original down as a woman shooter, even if he is a range inspector. I don't mind losing four yearlin's half 's much as missing a chance to meet up with this here Original. Him and me are going to get into a mighty tight jack pot some day where we gotta shoot it out between us."

"You 'll kill him then?" The girl popped the question abruptly; a note of eagerness would not be denied. The outlaw grinned.

"Why 're you so mighty p'tickler 'bout this here Original Bill's passin' over?" he drawled.

"Because I hate him," Hilma answered, and she turned and walked to the house, leaving the man to finish her task.

They buried Old Man Ring at sundown. Uncle Alf said a prayer which flamed with the wrath of Jeremiah of the Captivity, Zang Whistler filled the grave, and that was an end to it. The three returned to the cabin. Uncle Alf saddled, gave Hilma a blessing crackling

with prophetic lightnings and rode off into the purpling dark. Zang Whistler, reluctantly mounting, rode his horse to the doorway, where Hilma stood. Wine and carnelian light from the west stained her cheek, made mysterious the depths of blue irises. She was beautiful in the man's eyes, but it was a beauty matching the cold white chimney of Cloud's Rest, highest watchtower of the Broken Horns. He looked down at her and was seized by a curious suffocation, a stoppage of blood at the heart. Leaning a little toward her, he stretched down his hand. Hilma took it.

"You — you 're bound to be mighty lonely all by yourself here, Miss Hilma," he said huskily. The girl's steady eyes read him.

"Maybe so," she returned with a touch of ice in her voice. She withdrew her hand and stepped back into the door-frame. "Maybe so; but I 'm going to learn to shoot."

Zang heard the heavy door creak shut and the sliding of the bar behind it.

CHAPTER V

THE morning after she had buried her father Hilma Ring set herself to a conscientious survey of the debit and credit aspect of her future; what were the assets and what the liabilities of Old Man Ring's daughter, left fatherless? She did this methodically and without any hindrance of emotion or grief born of the events of yesterday. Not once had she given way to tears since first she met Uncle Alf riding with her father's body swung across his saddle horn. Tears she 'd not known since the day her mother died; grief there could not be where tragedy had not trampled on love. Instead, her single inspiration, aside from the dominant one of necessity, was a vague, formless curiosity: What had this grubby little man she had lived with so long to show for all the years of bitter isolation in the Big Country?

So, when she had breakfasted on bacon and coffee and washed her plate and skillet, Hilma

dragged to the doorway the blue glazed zinc trunk containing the Bible, the family album and her doll and sat down on the doorstep to investigate. She chose the doorway, flooded in sunshine and with the stupendous panorama of the tumbling divides and the Broken Horns unrolled to infinite distances, because somehow the gnawing pain of lonesomeness was less sensible away from the dark corners of the house. Out from the trunk came a square tin box which she had never dared open before; it had been a Bluebeard's cache, exclusively the prerogative of her father to explore. Almost a thrill of expectation attending turning the key and lifting of the lid.

Nothing within to justify thrills. Just a sheaf of papers, a yellow-bound bank book, a portentous document with the arms of the United States graven in the midst of a frilled and curlicued border, — and a photograph. Hilma snatched at the latter the instant she spied it and let the hot sunshine fall on its dimmed surface while she gazed at it many minutes without movement. A woman — a very young woman — gazed back at her from the glossed surface. She stood, in wedding dress and veil, one hand stiffly holding a bou-

quet in a paper cornucopia, the other resting on the shoulder of a seated man, who glared frozenly, his silk hat nursed in the crook of one arm.

Her mother and father, these two. They had posed in wedding finery back there in a forgotten day when love was young and life lay rosy along their path. Dully, yet with a dogged insistence, Hilma's imagination began to reconstruct the picture that lay beyond that figured back drop the photographer had arranged behind the stiffly posed bridal couple. The back drop rolled up and she saw these two — the young girl with her cornucopia of flowers, the man with his sacerdotal silk hat — walk down a vista together. She saw the figure of the girl fade as if in twilight — fade until it disappeared altogether, and the man stood beside a graven stone on a cheerless prairie. Then on and on, through the vista imagination painted, the man walked stumblingly, purposelessly; he fell and rose again, fell and struggled to his feet, then went down a last time ——

The girl slowly lifted her gaze to that flower-blown knoll above the creek where yesterday she had dug a grave, — the end of the

long road. From the distant mound of earth to the photograph and back to the mound once more Hilma's eyes traveled. She was stirred to depths never before plumbed; some deep-lying, half-sensed sympathy struggled for a form of thought to clothe itself. Life: Hilma Ring never before had glimpsed it subjectively. Life, with its promise of joy and high hopes, life, which buffeted and scarred its creatures yet held inexorably to the road of obstacles, to fall and to rise again, to fall at last into the long rest; for the driven creatures on this road of life rather than concretely for the twain of the photograph was Hilma Ring's sympathy awakened.

For the first time in her nineteen years the daughter of the sheepman of Teapot Creek recognized herself kin with that high blue rampart of the Broken Horns, kin with the bluebonnets that blossomed just beyond the beaten 'dobe of the dooryard. Just a pencil dot in a vast chart.

Catching at only the penumbra of this truth, sensing it vaguely as some indefinable overtone of the life that was Hilma Ring, first the girl was appalled, then blind battle lust of her Norse forefathers claimed her all its own.

"Me!" she challenged a hundred-mile sweep of the Big Country, and there was no histrionic stilting in her voice, just a cold matter-of-factness. "Me, I 'm going to fight you — fight everybody. No love, no wedding veil and hand on some man's shoulder for me. Just fight."

Speech cleared the atmosphere of introspection like a thunderstorm. Immediately she dismissed the photograph from her mind — nor did it occur to her that this hidden treasure might have been a shrine of a withered little man's devotions — and came back to hard dollars and cents. Rather the search for them, for in the box on her knees was not so much as a Mexican dollar.

The bank book showed her father had something over two thousand dollars to his credit in the Grangers' Bank at Two Moons, but the box yielded a note for fifteen hundred dollars held against Ring, once renewed and due again in five months; interest was eight per cent. The government paper was title to the homestead here on Teapot — one hundred and sixty fenced acres with the house and water rights appertaining thereto. For the rest, sheep books.

Hilma studied these with slow thoroughness. Her father's bookkeeping was primitive and followed a system all his own. The sum of three hours' solid burrowing through the maze of crabbed figures and script — part of which was in Danish, which the girl translated with difficulty — was this: One of Old Man Ring's bands, numbering about twelve hundred, was ranging under the care of Miguez, the Basque, on the highlands where the Crazy Squaw breaks out of its gorge in the Broken Horns. A second and smaller band was thrown in with the big band that Woolly Annie, the sheep queen of the Big Country, was running over on the headwaters of the Poison Spider, a parallel stream down from the mountains fifteen miles or so to the south of the Crazy Squaw. Ring had been maintaining one sheep wagon and two herders with that outfit.

Hilma's assets, so she figured them, were two thousand sheep, two thousand dollars in the bank, three sheep wagons, with their crude equipment, and the homestead. Chief of her liabilities was that note for fifteen hundred dollars; the pay of the three herders totaled seventy-five dollars monthly and sowbelly, as the phrase of the country had it.

There was no will; Hilma knew nothing about wills, anyway. What had been her father's now was hers; she took that for granted. What disturbed her most was the total absence of ready cash. She could not think of sheep in terms of dollars, and had the vaguest idea of how a sheep or its wool was minted into dollars, what were the transactions of marketing and where the buyer might be found. All those things her father had kept secret, following his fixed idea that a woman had neither competency nor right in matters of business.

"I 've got to find money. Can't run a sheep outfit without money. Can't run myself even without money," Hilma complained querulously as she quit her place in the doorway and began to rummage through the house. She opened the pendulum door of the clock with the picture of the Minnesota State capitol on it and peered into the tiny cubby-hole. She explored all the stones of the fireplace and chimney throat above until her bare arm was sooty to the shoulder, but not one of them was loose or ready to swing out to disclose the hoped for cache.

"That old man!" Hilma caught herself ex-

ploding in anger; then she regretted the outburst. He was not here to answer back; it was unfair to quarrel with the dead. But even tolerance for the crotchet of a dead man yielded no dollars. The ransacked house was bare of coin as the sweep of the divide down to the dooryard. After several hours' searching Hilma went back to the mantel and, leaning her elbows on it, stood looking down at a little stack of silver piled thereon — three silver dollars, a quarter and two dimes. Yesterday Uncle Alf had put the money there; he said he had found it in her father's pockets.

Three silver dollars, a quarter and two dimes! This was the available capital Hilma had to start a life alone. To be sure, there was that two thousand dollars in the Two Moons bank, thirty miles away. But the girl never had been inside a bank, knew nothing about banks. She was more than half convinced that nobody but the one who deposited that money would be recognized by the bank people as competent to withdraw it. Bankers were all sharks she had heard her father say many times.

The girl went to the flour barrel, took stock of the sides of bacon on the nails over the wood

box, opened the coffee canister and peered inside. Three dollars and forty-five cents ——

Zang Whistler found her brooding thus when he rode up. Hilma had not heard his pony's hoof beats outside the door; she made a quick leap toward the rifle propped against one wall of the fireplace when the man from Teapot Spout appeared in the doorway.

"Sho, now, Miss Hilma, you 're not figurin' to pump lead at a good friend come to make good medicine for you." Zang swept off his hat with a cavalier's grace; his bold eyes, a little raffish and devil-may-care in their way of falling on women, were challenging the spirit of the feminine creature to tilt in the age-old tourney. Hilma's answering glance, impersonal and cleanly cold as light struck from crystal, was matched by her voice:

"You round here again? Yesterday you dropped in right timely when I needed you, but to-day ——"

"You 're past needing a little neighborly help, I suppose," Zang cut in with a disarming smile. "Don't need anybody to advise you how to run the sheep business, or what kind of a game to play in this war the cow outfits have started over the range question? All wised up

along them lines?" He straddled a chair, though the girl still stood, back to the fireplace suggesting anything but hospitality by her pose of calm self-sufficiency. The leader of the Teapot Spout nest of outlaws spread out his hands with a giving gesture.

"Look here, Miss Hilma, I did n't ride all the way over here from the Spout this morning just to have you play the old game of looking at me like I was some crop-eared coyote yap-yappin' for his supper. Your old game of makin' small of me 's sort of in the discard now that your pappy 's gone over, and looks to me from this side of the road like time 's come for you and Zang Whistler to have a man talk together — all cards on the table an' no sanded deck. How 'bout it?"

This new line of attack, at such variance with Zang's accustomed rough gallantries on the occasions of his past visits to the Ring home ranch, caught Hilma with no matching strategy. She stared at the confident, smiling face of the cattle rustler with no attempt to dissimulate either surprise or curiosity.

"It 's just this way, Miss Hilma," Zang ran on easily, "whether you know it or not — and I reckon not, because your pappy was

tight-mouthed as any old porcupine — but since you all took up your claim here on Teapot, your pappy 's sorta th'owed in with me an' my boys over to the Spout. He used to give us information whenever he heard Original Bill, the inspector, had his war paint on an' was projectin' round to give us a run; now an' then we 'd leave a few weaned calves in that little hid corral you 've got. Long an' short of it all is your pappy was in pretty deep with Zang Whistler an' his outfit of blackballed cow-punchers — so you 're in, too." Zang's talking hands moved to show his cards were falling fairly on the table.

"Well?" This from Hilma without enthusiasm.

"Now your pappy's stake in this deal," Zang continued imperturbably, "was an occasional split when we managed to run some of our stock over to Niobrara for a sale, an' my promise to put every man an' gun I 've got in the Spout behind him come time when the big cow outfits and he came to a show-down on the range fight. That promise stands, Miss Hilma — for you just like it did for him."

"You mean your boys stand ready to back up the sheep people with guns?" For the first

time animation fired the girl's features and a light kindled in her eyes.

"I did n't say we 'd back all the sheep people," Zang corrected. "I said you could count on us in case the cattle outfits start to move your sheep off the range. An' listen, girl, that time is n't far off as I reckon it. Here 's the layout. Five years ago, when ole Woolly Annie was the first to bring sheep into this country, the Hashknife an' the Flying O an' the Circle Y outfits drawed a line down along the spurs of the Broken Horns an' says, 'Everything east of this line 's cattle range; keep your woollies back in the high ground.'

"But 'long comes old Hard Winter Peters up on Beaver, an' he runs his sheep across the dead line. Then your pappy breezes in with his band on Crazy Squaw, inside the cowmen's boundary, an' th'ows in with Woolly Annie. Not to mention Zang Whistler, who has ways of his own for invadin' the cow outfits' rights. Which it 's all made the big cow owners to Cheyenne and back in England plumb restless an' rollicky as a new-broke bronc. So they sets this shorthorn, Original Bill — which he an' me used to ride night herd together on many a drive up the ole Plummer Trail — they sets

him on the trail of Zang Whistler an' a-snoopin' round keeping a lookout on the sheep people who 're invadin' the cattle range. Fact he called here other day shows you 're on his blacklist.

"But still the sheep keep edgin' in an' edgin' in — your pappy's, ole Woolly Annie's an' all the rest — an' still Zang Whistler rides out of Teapot Spout to see what he can see. You 're followin' close?"

Hilma nodded tensely. Her visitor was touching upon that subject which had called forth such fiery prophecies of woe from Uncle Alf, which had moved her to vow undying enmity against the barons of the Big Country; he revealed much she had only guessed under her father's tight-lipped dominion. Zang drove home his point with unconscious eloquence. He had risen from his chair and now stood facing the girl.

"So you see, the big owners are gettin' mighty riled up; an' they hired the Killer to go through the range country an' do with his rifle — sneaking behind coulee banks an' pot-shotting from under bridges — and do with a rifle what they can't do with strong talk. They aim to scare the sheepmen an' homesteaders

who 've busted up their range with fence lines — scare 'em out of the country by killings. Your pappy, 'ole Hard Winter Peters, Jay North — all lyin' with a stone on their heads so 's the Killer can collect for his tally from the big augers down to Cheyenne.

"When they savvy murders an' killing in the dark won't work, what 's the next step? Just as sure as prairie dogs have chin whiskers, girl, the powerfulest men in the Stockmen's Alliance 'll play their last card. They 'll hire a gang of bad men and quick shots to come into this country an' clean up — just like those Montana Vigilantes did a few years ago. Then it 's goin' to be knock-down-an'-drag-out, an' hell's cinders flyin' every which way."

"Sooner that comes the better," the girl gritted, her mouth pulled down in a hard bow of hate. Zang, who gloried in his new-found power finally to play upon the emotions of this baffling creature of cold beauty, permitted a new note to creep into his voice, one of tender solicitude:

"What are you aimin' to do, girl? How 're you goin' to tackle life when all these things I 've been specifyin' are buildin' right up in front of you?" Hilma's eyes instantly became

glazed over with their old defensive aloofness. Their cold stare seared like needles of liquefied air.

"Me? Why, I 'm going to run my sheep; that 's all." Zang's face suddenly went red; he took a swift step toward the girl.

"No, you 're not, girl," came his hot words. "You 're not goin' to stand up against a cyclone alone — not when I 've got every claim on you a man can have." Hilma's lips were parted in a slow, teasing smile; her eyes mocked.

"They call me an outlaw," Zang's words tumbled on tumultuously. "Well, you 're an outlaw at heart, an' fit to team up with another of the same brand. You 're comin' with me over to the Spout so 's we can see through together all the hell that busts loose an' —— "

Zang leaped lightly as a mountain cat and threw an arm about Hilma's waist. His free hand he slipped under her chin to force her head, with its glory of dandelion gold, back for the kiss his lips flamed to give. The eyes that blazed so close to his were wild as a trapped panther's. Full lips so near his parted over sharp teeth in almost an animal snarl.

Hilma did not scream. She merely slashed

Zang twice across the face from ear to chin with lightning sweep of her nails, then bowed her strong shoulders and pressed one knee against his thigh to break his hold upon her.

"This kiss — is comin' — with interest added on to it," Zang panted. Silently, desperately the girl fought him.

A figure darkened the doorway. Came a drawling voice: "Ex-cuse me!"

Zang Whistler released the girl and leaped back, his hand dropping swiftly toward his hip.

Original Bill Blunt, the range inspector, stood with shoulder against doorpost, laughing silently.

CHAPTER VI

"An' now," quoth Timberline Todd, "we 'll top off this feed of victuals with a flock of can peaches. I always did favor can peaches since once over to No Wood in the winter of Ninety — no, I reckon it must 'a' been in the late fall — that was the winter I froze my left laig ridin' —— "

"If you said can peaches," interrupted Andy Dorson, across the table, "that 's enough; I don't need no introduction to 'em personal."

The friend of can peaches scowled. His gaunt, leathery cheeks were sucked inward, and the drooping tips of his frizzled mustache twitched petulantly.

"The same I was declarin'," he took up his tale with measured emphasis, "it bein' the late fall of Ninety, an' Mis' Bonnie Blackburn specifyin' to hold a sociable to raise the dust for a Methody church, which there never was

a livelier cricket in shoe leather than this Bonnie girl, purty as a Christmas card an' always on the prod to start somethin' for the good of he-men's souls ——"

Andy Dorson's impatient eye had signaled distress to Phenie Logan, the trim little person who "dealt 'em off the arm" at the Rhinoceros Eating House, Two Moons' justly popular restaurant. Phenie, crisply fresh and refreshing to the eye in blue print dress and starched apron, sleeves rolled up from round arms, hair of sunburned gold piled high in a Psyche knot, had moved down to the table where the two cronies from the Hashknife outfit were dining. She laid one competent hand, knuckles down, on the tablecloth to indicate to the absorbed Timberline her immediate readiness to serve. Timberline, again interrupted, looked up dazedly.

"He says two cans of can peaches, Mis' Phenie," Andy interpreted.

"An' make 'em Minervy brand, Mis' Phenie," Timberline hastily interposed. "That was the brand Bonnie Blackburn chose for her Methody church raffle because the name 's religious."

"Religious?" Andy echoed with heavy sur-

prise. "Draw me a picture, Timberline, of this religious brand of can peaches."

Phenie Logan tossed her head with a rippling laugh and lingered to enjoy to the full the reactions already charting their course across Timberline's weathered features. The elderly cow-punch had slammed his knife and fork down on his plate; a single tug whipped the sleazy napkin from where it was tucked under his bulging Adam's apple; the legs of his chair slithered in a backward push across the sanded floor. Timberline Todd's blue eyes, usually mild as the cups of a windflower, had hardened to sizzling carbon points. His cheeks were sucked in until the knobs of his jaw sockets stood out like twin headlands on the bleak contour of his features.

"I takes into count, Andy Dorson," old Todd began with studied politeness, "you was born somewheres under a barn, an' your early trainin' — most particular religious uprairin' — was 'bout as lackin' as a hermit kiote's; but allowin' for them drawbacks — the same you bein' not accountable for — anybody but a Crow squaw knows Minervy at the Well, which she is in the same class with Ole Man Noah an' his ark for gen'ral publicity.

"Miss Phenie, if you 'll be so kind, just rope two cans of Minervy-at-the-Well can peaches."

Now it was Andy Dorson's turn to lose his temper. His friend's aspersions on his immediate forbears and the deficiencies of his early education, loosed against him as they were in the presence of Phenie Logan — admittedly Two Moons' reigning belle — were deliberate and unprovoked insults. No long span of friendship could brook such incharity. Moreover, Andy hated to see a man old as Timberline Todd display so publicly his appalling ignorance.

"Of course," he began in a languid drawl, "anybody whose early youth was spent herdin' sheep, when he was n't languishin' in jail for bustin' the statues made an' appointed, could n't accumulate much in the gen'ral line of ancient history. If this child of misfortune I 'm specifyin' had had even a Chinaman's chance at a education he 'd 'a' known this here Minervy never knew about wells an' water holes, she bein' rated high in the queen stuff. Which she packed up her war bag, come Christmas holidays, an' went to propose marriage to Ole Man Solomon, knowin' him to be a right smart marryin' man."

Timberline gazed long into the eyes of his erstwhile friend. Scorn and pity sought for possession of his own steely eyes. He suddenly turned in his seat and hailed Phenie, who was standing on a chair before a shelf of canned goods up near the street door.

"If you 'll be so kind, Mis' Phenie, just trot them can peaches along in the cans." Then to Andy: "Dorson, I don't aim at makin' any issue of this Minervy business, howbe you 're sure makin' a triple X roach-haired dam' fool of yourself. But facts is facts even in the hands of pore ignorant orphans. To mark this trail broad: Minervy was a right handsome Jew girl who lived back in them days before the Mexican War. Her pappy used to send her to the well to tote water for the family. An' once she was just fillin' up the old pitcher when an outfit of strangers come along the trail with camels, which they used to break to saddle them days for some reason I ain't prepared to state.

"So this Minervy girl not only watered all the strangers but she watered all the camels. Which it wore her plumb thin to do, a camel takin' enough water in his system at one settin' to do a small herd of steers. So she got herself

a big reputation in them parts as a camel waterer, an' some artist painted her picture. Parson Hollingshed over to No Wood had it hung up in his setting room; which it has underneath the picture, Minervy at the Well."

Phenie arrived at the table just then with two cans of peaches, their tops opened and turned back. Behind the pretty biscuit shooter followed another figure whom the disputants in the heat of their argument failed to observe. An arresting shape she was. Of enormous girth, which was more solid muscle than fat; big masculine hands ungloved; a ridiculously inadequate bonnet with some nightmare feather sprouting out from its crown resting on her great head like half an eggshell on a globe of the world; the woman appeared a demobilized Amazon translated from legendary Pontus to the Big Country. When she took a seat at the table across the room from the two cowmen her feet, shod with men's boots, stuck out beyond the table line. Over each boot the turned-up leg of a pair of overalls showed under the hem of her calico skirt. She ordered ham and eggs, "fry 'em easy"; her smile, wholly feminine and all motherly, accompanied the order she gave to Phenie.

This was Woolly Annie, the sheep queen, in from her sheep range on the headwaters of Poison Spider for a spree of buying in Two Moons. Once comfortably seated, she observed the two cowmen leisurely. Her great moon face, red and wind-wrinkled as a frosted apple, gathered into a quizzical mask of tolerant disgust — as if from a safe distance she were watching two skunks at play. Timberline Todd, leaning forward elbows on table and a can of peaches between his hands, was holding up for the other's inspection the gaudy gold and red label.

"See that woman in the picture?" he was adjuring in a high nasal whine; "that there 's Minervy at the Well like I told you."

"Minervy's grandma's pet aunt!" Andy Dorson snorted. "Show me a camel standin' round anywhere in the picture waitin' to be watered by a Jew girl. Show me a pitcher! Show me a well! An' what 's Minervy doin' with that ox-goad she 's got in her hand? Why she wearin' that helmet on her head? Answer me pronto, Mister Todd."

A distinct snort from the direction of the table where sat Woolly Annie — a snort from Gargantuan nostrils. Neither of the cowmen

heeded. They were leaning across opposite sides of the table, face to face, flaming eye to flaming eye. The can of peaches between them quivered and slopped sticky liquor over its rim.

"Anybody but a sheep-stealin' son of a Blackfoot mother beater could tell that there 's Queen Minervy all rigged out in her war paint to go make marriage medicine with Ole Man Solomon, king of the Jews!" Andy Dorson was tapping the label on the can with a graphic forefinger while speech tumbled smoking hot from the furnace of his mouth.

Again the whiffling snort from Woolly Annie. Both men turned their faces toward the source of the interruption. They saw a big hand cram a napkin into a cavernous mouth while a huge torso, showing above the table top, quivered and rippled with suppressed laughter. They recognized the sheep queen of Poison Spider despite the paroxysms that racked her. Timberline Todd allowed the can of peaches he held to sink slowly to the table. There was silence for a minute. Then, in the most casual tone in the world, from Timberline:

"Yes, sir, as I was sayin' before interrupted, that 's a mighty sad thing I heard tell about

this here Elk Waters from down Panhandle way."

Gone in an instant was the flush from the cheeks of both men; sped was the light of battle from their eyes. Their whole attitude was one of slightly bored lassitude; to Timberline's new lead Andy made languid answer as he speared a half peach from his can with a fork and pouched it.

"You were sayin' he was infortunate ——" quoth Andy.

"Infortunate 's a mild word for poor Elk's case," drawled Timberline, as he tilted his fruit can and poured out a spoonful of sirup. "First year they moved up from the Panhandle into this Big Country Elk's old man got bit by a hydrophoby skunk. It did n't take on him for nigh a week, then he went just a-rarin'; peared like he figured he was a skunk with a bushy tail, an' finally Elk had to kill him with an ax."

"Sho!" chuckled Andy in sympathy.

"Then Elk's brother, little Elk, sorta fell into bad company up on the Musselshell an' the Vigilance Committee had to run him down an' hang him to a cottonwood limb one cold day in January."

"Hum-hum!" Andy's head wagged dolorously. Woolly Annie's ham and eggs had arrived, but there was no knife-and-fork clatter from her table. The air of the two cowmen was absolutely detached and isolated. They might have been miles from the nearest listener. Timberline sighed gustily.

"Yes, sir, I never heard of a man who got rid by hard luck so hard as this here Elk Waters. Seemed like the devil just marked him for his child. Le 's see what else. Oh, yes, after his wife got burned up in Elk's little old soddy when the baby pulled the lamp over on hisself, Elk he got plumb meloncholy an' he finally took to herdin' sheep."

Bang! went a coffee cup into its saucer at the adjacent table.

"He *was* low in his mind," Andy volunteered. Timberline droned on:

"His sheep et up most of the range over in the Basin and then they took to browsin' down people's woodpiles and eatin' the geraniums the womenfolks nussed tenderly in their window boxes, an' Elk begins to be afraid he 's gettin' the blats besides fallin' hair and stone in the kidneys. Poor ole Elk don't mind the fallin' hair an' stone in the kidneys nigh so

much as he 's afraid of the blats. So last winter he goes to Arkansaw Hot Springs to get the blats boiled out of him, he bein' strong as a red onion of the sheep. But pore ole Elk gets his last an' worse blow down to the Springs.

" 'No use your coming here,' says the doc in charge of the Springs. 'We can boil out rheumatics like we 'd boil shirts, an' we can cure lepresy an' send cripples home good as new, but there ain't no springs invented which can boil the sheep blats out of a sheep herder.' "

There was a sound of a chair pushed back, a few heavy treads which made the eating-house floor tremble, and Woolly Annie stood by Andy and Timberline's table. She turned her great moon face to one, then to the other; it was bland and unruffled as the shell of a pumpkin in harvest frost.

"Gentlemen, both," said Woolly Annie, and with lightninglike movement her hands had shot out and wrapped themselves about the two half-consumed cans of peaches. Before either man could recover from the shock of her attack, the cans were inverted over their respective heads. Heavy globes of fruit and streams of sticky sirup cascaded down on each.

"Minervy at the Well — that 's me," came the throaty rumble. She deftly caromed each emptied can off a drenched head, then marched to where Phenie Logan was rolling in agony of silent mirth behind the cigar counter.

"Get on your bonnet, Phenie girl," she commanded, "and come down to the Boston Store to help me pick out some crêpe-desheeny nightgowns for myself an' my girl Tweenie."

CHAPTER VII

With the keen and competent Phenie — arbiter of fashion for Two Moons' younger set — to play sponsor for her taste and buffer between her buckskin bag of gold pieces and the cupidity of the storekeepers, Woolly Annie shopped gorgeously. For her numerous tribe out on Poison Spider, that is to say, rather than in her own interests. The sheep queen's sartorial needs were strictly Spartan; overalls for the range, with a calico skirt to wear over that bifurcated utility when she rode to town; certain shrieking red flannel substantials which had a way of glowing like a blind fire through whatever print stuff covered her huge torso; a bonnet — always the same bonnet — for town wear. That was about all. But for her brood, numbering nine and stepladdered down from twenty to the comparatively tender age of eight — the last a posthumous child serving as a memento of a father who had eloped with a

burlesque queen in Cheyenne — for this brood of likely youngsters the sheep queen's buckskin money bag would ever yawn its widest.

Woolly Annie preserved no vain illusions on the subject of personal adornment. She realized most sensibly that the task of landscaping her in terms of laces and organdies would be equivalent to planting Sleepy Ned Mountain to geraniums and myrtles. But for Cathay, her eldest, for Ravenna, Sophia, Christiania and Perugia — all born during the term of subscription to the World's Atlas and Book of Knowledge, dollar down and five ditto a year — for these fortunate ones Two Moons' best was little enough.

"I 've spent my life raisin' sheep an' children," was the lady's usual summary of her philosophy of work. "A sheep 's dressed by nature, but a kid 's like a painted picture — you gotta touch it up, an' the artisticer the better, I says."

Woolly Annie and Phenie were the center of a small maelstrom in the Boston Cash Store. The giantess from Poison Spider was standing, booted feet wide apart, bold eye ranging the stocked shelves and upon her broad cheeks a mantling flush of triumph. What she com-

manded a spidery little clerk made haste to display. A near-by counter was a welter of bolts of gingham, of boxes uncovered to display intimate treasures, knots of cerise and cherry-colored ribbon. The sheep queen, with a frank and free movement lifted one hem of her calico skirt and plunged a huge hand into a concealed pocket of her overalls. She brought out from the depths a length of string knotted at several places.

"An' now corsets, young man," she commanded grandly. "Phenie, lift up your arms an' let me see how you measure up with my Cathay, which she 's developed remarkable since I bought her that last pair."

The surprised Phenie demurred at so unconventional a comparison. But Woolly Annie simply went ahead with her domestic surveying, reassuring the girl in a hoarse whisper that could have been heard out on Main Street that "nobody should mind a poor little water spider like him." The clerk's fanlike ears registered mortification even while he discreetly turned his back in pretense of searching the shelves.

"Just what I told Cathay!" came the booming triumph from the lips of the sheep queen.

"I says to my Cathay, when we was makin' mention of corsets, 'If you don't take the same measure as Phenie Logan I 'm a Chinaman,' I says. 'But she 's a perfec' thirty-four, ma,' Cathay comes back, she bein' read up from that flock of pattern magazines I bought her last Christmas.

"'Since when,' says I, 'have they begun to measure figgers like quarter sections? Perfec' thirty-four — huh! Me, I guess I know who 's got a figger an' who ain't without — now young man, if you 've got your stock of corsets laid out, this is what I want." She held up the knotted string taut between stretched hands. "This here farthest knot 's Cathay's measure round the bust; next one 's Sophia an' this shortest one belongs to my Peruggy, this bein' her first pair of stays an' the girl just all boiled up with excitement 'bout 'em."

Woolly Annie, hands on hips and countenance beaming unadulterated joy, awaited the joint conference between Phenie and the clerk over the practical interpretation of the knots. Finally the corresponding articles of web and steel were set aside. Then suddenly from the shepherdess of Poison Spider:

"Young fella, how big are you round the

waist?" The skittish clerk admitted that was a point of information he did not carry round in his mind.

"Find out," commanded Woolly Annie, and she bent a stern eye upon him while he sought a tape measure and cinctured himself with it. "You 're bowed some," was her blunt comment following a swift glance along the suffering clerk's extremities, "but I don't reckon sprung legs make any never mind with the length of pants. You seem to have the same gen'ral get-up for pants as my boy Dolphus so I 'll take two pairs of pants which 'd fit on to you." Then in confidence to the little biscuit shooter as the clerk hopped to the rear of the store where the gents' furnishings were kept: "That Dolphus of mine gets just a-rarin' and a-tearin' when I buys pants an' such for him. Says a boy eighteen oughta pick out his own pants.

"'All right,' says I, 'any time you earn yourself five dollars you hop on a horse an' come into town an' blow yourself to some pants. Meantime your old woman 's got judgment enough to buy leg hobbles for a wuthless no-count son — more particular since she wears 'em herself!'" The lady finished this revela-

tion of domestic economy with a raucous hoot such as passed with her for sprightly laughter.

The orgy in the Boston Cash Store was not completed until the lady in hidden overalls had cajoled and threatened Phenie to choose for herself something nifty in shirt waists, this being Woolly Annie's unvarying prerogative in the direction of reward for the girl's shopping instincts, always requisitioned. Then the sheep woman swung out into Main Street alone while Phenie hurried back to preside over whatever short orders might come to the Rhinoceros during the afternoon. The mother of the promising nine on the Poison Spider consciously made her peregrinations up the town's chief street a sort of unofficial triumph. Who would not if a trip to town was something repeated but three or four times on the year's calendar?

She stopped to roll and smoke a cigarette with Sheriff Red Agnew in front of the Homesteader bar. She hailed with trumpet voice old Dad Armbruster, owner of the Yellow and Black sheep outfit up on the headwaters of Crazy Squaw, and held him in a half-hour professional conversation on the outlook for the next shearing and what in deletion he was

doing to keep down the pesky kiotes this season. The afternoon was far spent — and farther the golden double eagles in Woolly Annie's buckskin bag — when regretfully she turned into the Occidental Hotel to get what she termed a wash-up. It was her intention to spend the night in that hostelry; the home ranch on Poison Spider was thirty-three miles out over the tumbling divides, and its mistress had no inclination to wear herself to a shadow by making the distance to town and back between suns.

Meanwhile her presence in Two Moons set certain currents to swirling in quiet places.

It may be said that the ultimate resistant citadel of the cattle clan in Two Moons — so swiftly turning from a cow town into a camp of cowmen's enemies — was the Capitol Saloon, Dad Strayhorn, proprietor. And of that citadel the sacred inner chamber of the clan's elect, always most closely tiled, was a certain upstairs room of furnishings the simplest, — just a green baize covered table with a slot in its exact center, seven chairs, four cuspidors decorated with blue daisy chains about their flaring rims and a sideboard for the accommodation of cigars, strong waters and — on occa-

sions of lengthy sessions — food. In this sacrosanct room usually could be found the stiffest game north of Denver. Not a paltry pastime of diddling away white chips on jacks or better, but a game with the hair on, wherein not infrequently the disposition of an entire shipment of fattened beef cattle depended solely on catching a flush filler or making a king-full stand up.

Here the lordly foremen of cow outfits numbering their thousands gathered around the green baize to have a hack at Fortune's trailing robe, even though a year's salary and bonuses might be the price of that lady's disfavor. Here, too, the occasional big director of one of the cattle companies up from Cheyenne or out from Washington played his yellows against a rival director's. It is legend with the Capitol that a titled young man representing a great English cattle concern and visiting the Big Country for the first time, "did n't know the game of draw", and after thirty-six hours steady in Dad Strayhorn's upper room took the stage out with a little more than $90,000 buttoned under his tweeds.

Not for the lowly or the casual cowpunch was this quiet upper room. Dad himself was

perpetual tiler over the door leading thereto. To Dad came Timberline Todd and Andy Dorson shortly after their encounter with Woolly Annie; each man still carried about his person the faintly reminiscent perfume of Minervy-brand can peaches. While Dad himself poured out their liquor — an honor the Capitol's proprietor reserved only for old trail mates — Timberline asked in a lowered voice if "they" were upstairs. In these days of crisis and the rumbling portents of a storm in the Big Country one of Timberline's tested loyalty could ask concerning the occupants of the sacred chamber without violation of precedent; Dad Strayhorn knew nothing less than emergency could prompt an invasion of the mysteries above. He gravely nodded.

"When you go up with the next round," Timberline earnestly whispered, "tell 'em ——" He bent his lips close to Strayhorn's ear to finish the sentence. The wind wrinkles in Dad's countenance did not flicker a betrayal of any interest over the intelligence Timberline communicated. The two cronies from the Hashknife outfit sipped their drink. Strayhorn disappeared through the mystic door. A few minutes later he emerged from the guarded

stairway and, catching Timberline's eye, gave his head a perceptible jerk in the direction whence he had come. Timberline moved casually through the crowd of the Capitol's patrons, studied for a minute the latest stock quotations from South Omaha Market, which were pinned on the wall near the door. Then he was not. He simply had vanished.

What passed upon Timberline's arrival in the room above, who were there about the green table, — these things may develop as circumstance wills. Sufficient to indicate that a board of strategy of the cattle clan received certain information from the lanky cowman, made a quick and unanimous decision affecting the next move in the deadly struggle for the range and gave Timberline terse instructions. The latter humble retainer partook of a drink of ceremony — a survival of the feudal dispensation of salt in the elder day of knight and villain — then faded. A word to Andy Dorson back in the Capitol's bar and both men drifted out on to the street, there to separate.

The remainder of that afternoon they loafed around, visited certain bars where hardy riders in from the range congregated, dropped into this and that feed stable where newcomers were

uncinching their mounts. But as Timberline and Andy Dorson loafed so inconspicuously they passed a word, — just a word casually spoken into the ear of this man known to be true and that one counted daring. The word was carried with lengthening shadows out and out across purpling prairies to where cooks' fires gleamed in the falling darkness, signaling riders in from the ranges. And this was its substance — a moving; there would be a sheep moving on Poison Spider that night.

Night in Two Moons was joyous for Woolly Annie, the sheep queen. After dining gorgeously at the Rhinoceros Eating House, where Phenie, the grateful recipient of favors, paid in kind with an extra helping of saleratus biscuit and wild honey, the mistress of the Poison Spider domain hied her to a fair given by the Ladies' Loyal Aid of the First Church in Firemen's Hall. There the last of her double eagles took prodigal wings over the fishpond, the wheel of fortune and the whatnot booth. Woolly Annie's booming laughter shook the festoons of starred bunting on the rafters; she steered elderly gentlemen of her acquaintance into corners to retail to them behind a screening hand and in piercing whispers cer-

tain "hosses" — a hoss being a Rabelaisian anecdote scarcely meet for a church affair; at stated intervals she withdrew outside the doors to have a chummy smoke with herself. A great night following a great day!

Far out and away from Two Moons five horsemen waited under the starlight at a convergence of two roads. Two others came racking down a long slope from the north and joined them. The seven set their mounts to that long velvety gallop which only the tough cutting horse of the Big Country knows how to sustain over unending miles. Where the road dropped to a ford of the Poison Spider five more mounted men who had waited in the alder thickets spurred out and took their places in the solid core of moving horseflesh and human hate that skimmed the billowing divides. No word was passed. No man sought to recognize the one at his right nor the one at his left elbow. From leather boots hung on saddle horns the blunt butts of rifles protruded.

Here was the beginning of fulfillment of the word that had passed that day. There was to be a moving; sheep were to be moved that night.

Now the narrow ribbon of dust that was a road lay far behind the silent riders and their

horses' hoofs drummed softly on the unbroken turf. Steadily, steadily the land mounted upward toward the dim rampart of the Broken Horns, a high black dike raised against the lesser blackness of the sky, jagged of edge, seeming to menace the whole star-sprinkled firmament with imprisonment. Now and again a gurgling and chuttering of waters in flight gave tempo to the monotone of the thudding hoofs; that would be the Poison Spider purling down from its box cañon in the mountains ahead. A coyote's tremulous bawling, the rare tom-tom beat of some owl calling out of the alders; these were the only other noises.

Mile after mile through the night.

A rise was topped, and far ahead two red spots glowed against the bulwark of the mountains like rubies dropped on black velvet; perhaps five miles separated the two spots of color. At sight of them the cavalcade came to a halt. A leader's voice sounded.

"We split here. Six of you cross the creek and make for that fire to the north. Don't start the circus 'til you hear us tune up down at the south camp. If anythin' on two legs puts up a fight kill it, but don't go outa your way to invite any indictments. Remember,

nobody knows nobody else if it comes to a court case. Now ——"

The band split; one half splashed across the ford and bore away from the stream; the other segment followed on up the course of the hidden water.

Miguez, the Basque herder, and Tony, a thirteen-year-old waif of the sheep range, had long since finished their suppers before the fire and the man had gone to his bunk in the sheep wagon, leaving the boy with the sheep dog to keep watch over the band of eight hundred bedded down in a cup of the hills below the wagon. The boy was nodding, head on knees; the dog, curled at his feet, twitched and whimpered over the high places in a doggy dream.

Suddenly the dog's head jerked up and he gave a single short bark. Somewhere out in the darkness there was a swift spit of red flame, and the dog sank, twitching and slavering blood. The boy, in a folly of terror, turned and was climbing the short flight of steps giving on to the rear door in the bulky-sided sheep wagon when there was a swift patter of hoofs behind him; a hand bore down and snatched him up to a saddle.

"Keep your mouth shut or you 'll be

croaked," commanded a harsh voice. Just as a handkerchief was fumbled across his eyes he saw a ring of horsemen surround the sheep wagon and start shooting through its canvas sides; saw the door flung open and Miguez stagger out, hands high above his head and blood on his shirt. In another minute he was lying, hogtied from neck to heels and blindfolded, and he knew from the feeble sound of cursing in the Basque tongue that Miguez, still alive, was lying beside him.

The riders dismounted and threw a handful of brush on to the dying embers of the cook fire; then as red arrows began to flicker upward, they seized the tongue of the sheep wagon and drew that cumbersome house on wheels directly over the blaze. The fire played along the bottom of the wagon floor, licked round the sides and finally caught the canvas housing. A wide fiery pillar leaped upward, lighting all the little cup of the hills where lay the sheep; their huddled gray shapes were cut out of the blackness by the red glow; the clutter of woolly backs in the cup of the hills stirred restlessly like moving scum on a bubbling pot.

The mounting pillar of flame put the whole

band of eight hundred at the mercy of the riders. Swiftly they coursed round the rim of the cup, stationing themselves at wide intervals. Then, at an opening shot from their leader, the six rode slowly down on to the sheep band, each emptying the magazine of his rifle into the clotted mass as he descended.

It was slaughter. The scum of woolly bodies tossed and boiled wildly, rushing from side to side to seek escape from the whiplashes of fire all about. Individuals leaped upon the backs of their fellows and hobbled across a moving pavement to death. A few scuttered between horses' legs and ran bleating into the circle of the dark. The silence of the wide places under the stars was shattered by a horrid hubbub of blatting and bawling. Inexorably the circle of slaughterers drew smaller and the piles of bodies in the bottom of the depression waxed higher. Finally it became dangerous to horse and rider for any man to shoot longer, and the remnant of the band was ridden out of the charnel pit and scattered through the night with wild yip-yip-yips.

Away to the north a second pillar of fire was mounting toward the stars, and volleys of rifle shots came faintly on the wind.

Dawn came marching like an armed man out of the bad lands over across from the Broken Horns, all shell pink and peach flush in its glory. The new sun fell upon smoldering cinders and slaughter shambles there in the Big Country's pure sweep.

The sheep had been moved.

CHAPTER VIII

THAT moment when Original Bill surprised the outlaw from Teapot Spout in his struggle to impose rough mastery upon the girl Hilma was typical of the sharp movements of climax the genius of the Big Country delights to visit upon the puppet actors in the broad sweep of her comedy. Hot love is suddenly confronted by bitter hate; in the winking of an eye a man's little moment of ecstasy is transformed into one of violence, trembling upon the pull of a trigger finger. And the genius of the Big Country, having wrought thus, veils a laugh with the sleeve of her garment.

Hilma was the first of the twain the range inspector interrupted to coördinate impulse and action. Even as Zang Whistler's hand dropped to his holster she leaped in front of him, attempting to sweep him behind her with a powerful backward stroke of her arm. The movement was purely protective, yet the in-

stant before Original Bill's appearance the girl had been tigerish in her wrath against this man whose body she now screened against the expected bullet. Again the lounging figure against the doorpost permitted his lips to widen in silent laughter.

"Of course, Zang," he drawled, "the young lady's cuttin' into the game this way sorta puts you in a hole. You don't rightly feel like shootin' your way out from behind a woman, an' I admire your gentlemanly instincts."

No weapon had appeared in Original's hands; none even showed on his person. But he carried his right hand clinging loosely to the opened lapel of his jacket over his left breast. The range inspector had been the first to introduce into the Big Country the fashion of carrying a .45 on a flat spring holster hung from the shoulder beneath the jacket and directly over the heart; while in the holster the weapon had a protective value against a speeding bullet; it could leap out a sixteenth of a second quicker than one drawn from the hip. Original, too, had perfected through long and stern practice the somewhat delicate mastery of hammer firing — that is, the trigger of the gun was ignored and a lightning movement

of the thumb drew back and released the striking hammer even as the weapon was being withdrawn and leveled.

There had been but one man in all the range country between the Broken Horns and the Black Hills who was quicker on the draw than Original Bill, but a straight white line running through the latter's raven hair an inch or so above the left ear bore testimony to the fact that once this superior master's aim had been a shade off true. One such error was all Fate allotted him.

At Original's taunting words Zang's lips curled into an animal snarl, and he tried to push the girl from him. His gun was cocked in his hand. Still Original's right hung loosely from his jacket's lapel; still he smiled teasingly.

"Put her up, Zang," he commanded in a casual tone. "It 's plain as a dry trail you can't shoot your way outa this jack pot — leastways not with the lady exhibitin' her loving kindness like she does. I 'd admire for to have you alone over a top sight, Zang, but you can see for yourself I have to take you as I find you."

Hilma flamed fiery red as she appreciated

the sense of Original's blunt innuendo of cowardice leveled at Zang, but still some protective instinct stronger than her wrath forced her to continue to stave off the inevitable deadly speaking of the guns which she could loose any instant by retreating from her doggedly held place in front of Whistler.

"Why have you come here?" she mastered herself sufficiently to demand in a voice choking with rage. "What do you want this time?"

"Nothing very much, lady," Original answered, with his unwavering smile. "Name 's Zang Whistler, the same which is mentioned plenty an' various in grand-jury indictments found down to the court in Two Moons ever since there was a court. Grand larceny 's the brand I think those grand juries 've hung on to Zang."

Whistler put in a word. He had fully regained his customary poise of easy confidence. He consciously matched his tone with Original's soft drawl:

"Figure to take me to jail, Original?"

"That 's my aim, Zang. Soon 's I saw the prints of your little hoss round here t'other day I reckoned here was an easier place to get you than over in the Spout."

"Did n't have no hunger for comin' into the Spout after me, Original?" Zang laughed shortly.

"I never match up against forty, Zang, when I can find a way to match up with one — or even two." Original sent a quick flash of his teeth Hilma's way.

With all his pose of indolent ease there against the doorpost, Original's black eyes never left the figures of the two confronting him ten feet away. Though the girl's shoulders partially screened Whistler's body, and the broad flare of her blue skirt hid one of his legs, one booted foot was visible beyond the hem of her gown. Original's quick eye caught a movement of this foot; the toe lifted ever so little and sidled outward.

"Figure to take me in alive, a' course, Original." Zang spoke the words softly, almost in a croon, and the groping toe moved outward still farther.

"Alive 'd be much better, Zang," Original vouchsafed carelessly.

"Well," from the outlaw, "I reckon maybe ——" He leaped then, quick as a timber gray, back and away from the figure of the girl. Two shots sounded as one. The wide

brim of Original's high-crowned beaver hat suddenly dropped before his eyes, cut clean away from the crown. As he gave a great bound forward Original shook the obscuring hat from his head.

Zang was staggering backward, striving mightily to twist the hand which held his revolver up to a shooting position. Something white and glistening showed against the back of that hand; it was a bone splinter pushed through the hole a bullet had drilled.

Hilma screamed shrilly and threw out her arms to seize Original in his meteor plunge toward her companion. He slipped under one arm and closed with the outlaw just as the latter's gun was being transferred to his sound hand. The impact of the range inspector's one hundred and sixty pounds of bone and muscle sent Zang spinning back against the wall. Even as his back crashed on the logs a band of steel circled his right wrist with a vicious snap. He felt his antagonist's hand crawling up his left arm to drag it down to imprisonment.

Original, sure of his man, had dropped his .45 in a side pocket as he cleared the space between them. When first he closed with

Zang he had shaken the gun out of the latter's paralyzed grip and spurned it out of reach with his foot. But the quick flux of action had prevented his mind from encompassing all the angles of the situation; his interest, centered wholly on the man, had overlooked the woman. As, head to breast, he jammed Whistler against the wall Original caught from the tail of his eye Hilma's swift bound for the weapon he thought he had rendered useless.

He saw her stoop and straighten with the thing in her hand just as Whistler, bracing one foot against the log wall behind him, gave a mighty heave forward. Even as their two bodies lurched outward Original pivoted on one heel and swung his opponent's body between himself and the rising weapon.

"Get him, girl!" Zang screamed in a whistling breath. But Hilma, finding herself in danger of being caught in the angle between the projecting fireplace and the back wall, twisted to escape and tripped over one of Zang's flailing legs. Before she could recover herself Original seized the instant's opportunity and, half lifting Zang with a tremendous heave of his shoulders, jammed him back against the girl in the trap of solid stone and

logs. He heard her breath come in a half sob of anguish.

Zang, sensing instantly the advantage Original's strategy had turned, summoned every ounce of his strength to push out from the trap and free his ally. But a sharp catching of breath in his ear told him his effort was only crushing Hilma the more. He tried to edge to one side, leaving her a hole to slip through.

Original forestalled him by a second terrific drive of his shoulder into the pit of the stomach. Zang lifted his wounded right hand, from whose wrist dangled the ugly unfilled mate of the wristlet of steel biting into the flesh, then he flailed the cuff down on the black head beneath his chin. The blow landed true. For just an instant the pressure of determined muscle against his body slackened.

That instant Zang seized to twist eel-like out of the cul-de-sac of the chimney corner, though he could not shake Original's grip from him. Hilma, freed, leaped past the struggling men and again brought up the point of her weapon to slay.

But a rally by Original brought Whistler's body whirling round as a shield against a bul-

let. White fear sent a spasm over the latter's features as he felt a snubbed point of steel against the small of his back.

"Give him the butt," he panted hoarsely. "Don't — try — to shoot!"

Then he bent his head to whisper brokenly into the ear just below his chin:

"Better quit! She 'll kill — I — won't."

Just a flash of Original's teeth bared in a grin as his head came up and one of his legs suddenly curled round below Zang's knees. Back they went against the heavy table just as the clubbed gun in Hilma's hands came swinging down upon Zang's shoulder instead of on the black head which had dodged less than an inch. The table teetered for an instant, then crashed over, and the three of them sprawled in a fighting, tumbling heap on the floor.

"I said alive was better 'n dead," Original grunted as they rolled in a deadly lock. Zang felt his left arm being inexorably warped away from its grip round Original's neck; his right, with the waiting cuff on the wrist, was almost useless because of the numbing wound through the palm. A sickening fear began to sweep over the outlaw; that bit of steel around

the wrist suddenly appeared symbolical; it was the steel that locked against liberty.

Hilma, now on her feet and with the clubbed revolver in her hand, followed, stooping, the course of the writhing men on the floor. Her lips were drawn back over feline teeth, her blue-black eyes were narrowed by hard-drawn lids into the eyes of a hunting panther. The will to slay possessed her wholly. For an instant a tousled black head was uppermost. She smote it hard with the heavy revolver butt — smote again, yet once again.

A metallic click, a long sigh and the shape of what had been a fighting one hundred and sixty pounds of virile, tricky thews and springs of tempered steel lay sprawled inert, nerveless. Zang Whistler, very white and shaking, slowly rose from the floor. His hands, held ashamedly at arm's length, were linked together by steel bands on a short steel chain.

Hilma's eyes were not for him. They were fixed upon the prone figure of Original Bill and the glint of pantherlike ferocity in them was undimmed. Zang's gun she had turned with the butt firm in her right hand; her left thumb was slowly pushing up the hammer.

The outlaw saw the movement of that thumb.

Swiftly he stooped to where the girl sat back on her heels near the helpless head and his manacled hands swooped down to seize and wrest the weapon from her. She leaped to her feet, eyes blazing. The man's eyes, meeting her unspoken challenge, were filled with mingled wonder and abhorrence.

"In this country," he said slowly, "folks don't shoot a man when he 's helpless — least of all women folks don't. That 's counted murder."

"I hate him — I hate him!" Hilma gritted through clenched teeth. "Him and his whole tribe of swaggering, robbing cowmen. Why should n't I shoot him?" Zang nodded to the wounded hand with the white sliver of bone protruding from a round hole.

"You see what he did to me," he said simply. "When a man quick and surefire as he is might 's well have put that hole through the middle of my forehead. He gives me this when I — when I was shootin' — to kill. In this country that kind of a thing 's called white —plumb white."

A slow flush began to creep above the line of the blue frock at Hilma's throat; it colored her round neck and hung a flag of shame upon

each cheek. She turned abruptly and went to the far corner of the room where she splashed water from a pail into a basin and busied herself tearing several strips from an old apron hanging on a nail. When she returned she found Zang on his knees beside the figure of their enemy.

"He 'll come round, I reckon," the man said. "Nobody who 's been all whittled up in gun plays like Original Bill 's goin' to take his checks to the bank just because of a couple of wallops on the coco from a gun butt. Here, I located this in one of his pockets. Tie me loose, will you?"

Zang held up a small key. Hilma had to stand very close to him to manipulate the locks on the handcuffs. Her bent head of glorious gold and the warm, reflected golden tints from the round of her neck were just below the man's ravening eyes. A suave, indefinable odor — the odor of warm flesh and of vigorous masses of hair — was in his nostrils. When the grip of steel finally was loosed from his wrists he instantly joined the freed hands about the girl's waist and drew her to him. She did not resist. In truth reaction from recent stress made her all the more apathetic, and she was

engulfed of a sudden by a vague yearning for something, somebody to lift her out of herself, to carry her off her feet so lately set in a path of blind passion.

Zang misread her yielding for something that was not. He bent and kissed her on the cheek, on the soft curve of her neck. Hilma flinched but did not draw away; nor did the man's hot caresses rouse in her any answering emotion. She accepted them because she did not have the will to resist any event of the moment.

"Now, Hilma," Zang was saying in a choked voice, as the girl automatically bathed his wounded hand from the basin set on the righted table — "now, Hilma girl, there 's nothin' left but for you to come back to the Spout with me. Here 's Original; all he 's got to do is to go back to Two Moons an' swear out a warrant for you an' a fresh one agin me — assault with a deadly weapon. All alone here, you 'll be caught an' sent to do a term down to Rawlins. In the Spout Original nor any posse he 's a mind to raise can't get you."

The girl steadily drained water over the red hole in the hand she held over the basin. She answered nothing.

"Don't you see, girl, you 're outlawed now — just like Zang Whistler?" the man urged. "What they call law in this country 'll be agin you from now until you 're caught. An' this man here, this Original Bill 's a mighty bad hombre to have campin' on your trail. I 'll say that for him because I know. He 's a wolf for trailing an' trailing an' never letting go. Over in the Spout I can give you protection an' — an', yes, Hilma girl, I can give you love. A clean love, Hilma, like what a man oughta give a woman. What do you say, Hilma?"

She had bound two lengths of gingham about the injured hand and deftly anchored them in place with a needle and thread before she made answer.

"If you want me on my terms, Zang, I 'll go with you." The outlaw's eyes lighted and he took a step toward her.

"What 's the contract, little woman?"

"You 'll hear that after we get to the Spout," the girl said evenly.

Fifteen minutes later Hilma Ring, on the back of her father's drab little horse, Christian, was riding with Zang Whistler toward the distant notch in the Broken Horns which rep-

resented the tortuous entrance into that secret valley of the outlaws called the Teapot Spout. Hung across her saddle bow was a blue gingham apron knotted about a small bundle of clothing and the tin box containing her father's sheep books, three dollars and forty-five cents in silver and a photograph of a young man and his bride who had looked upon a road to happiness many years back.

Original Bill Blunt lay still unconscious on the floor of the deserted cabin while his little horse Tige whinnied and pawed the ground impatiently in the dooryard.

CHAPTER IX

The sun was canting down toward the dike of the mountains when Original Bill returned to consciousness. It was not a comfortable transition; the beat of a thousand Sioux war drums was pulsing through his head. His whole body seemed a thing apart, beyond his power to order. His opening eyes gazed upon a roughly beamed and strange roof which had a way of expanding and contracting in defiance of all experience governing the behavior of roofs.

When he essayed to sit up there was a metallic clatter under him; a pair of handcuffs had slipped from his chest, where they lay, to the floor. The bright metal served to bridge the gulf of darkness whence the man was emerging. He recalled the fight, — two against one; his desperate twistings and turnings with a human shield held before him to receive the expected bullet. Original's hand stole to the hol-

ster over his heart; a shock of surprise came to him when he found his .45 reposing snugly under its spring.

The weapon had been in his pocket when he came to grips with Zang Whistler. The outlaw's act of restoring the gun to its place rather than confiscating it as a prize of war was a graceful courtesy not lost on Original. After all, had not he and Zang Whistler ridden trail together through hot sun and thunderstorm back in the old days before Zang took to carrying a running iron, before he was blackballed as a brand smoker? This incident of the gun remaining inviolate was but a touch of that chivalry of the cattle clan which made Zang Whistler and Original Bill Blunt kin despite the private warfare between them.

As for the girl Hilma — that blond-haired mountain cat who had pounded him into insensibility when she found shooting impossible — the range inspector's brain was still too clouded to grapple with this complexity in the situation.

He helped himself to his feet by a grip on the table edge, staggered to the water pail and plunged his burning head into its cold depths. Strength came rushing back to him with the

dissolving of the last cobwebs of unconsciousness. He heard a yearning whinny and went to the opened door. Tige, his loyal little horse, companion of a thousand days and nights in the vastness of the Big Country, came trotting up, bridle dragging, to nuzzle under his master's arm and express through inarticulate burblings and squeakings all the horsy fear phantoms he had undergone.

Here again was a white man's restraint on the part of Zang Whistler, Original reflected. The outlaw might have taken Tige as booty of successful combat and left his owner here afoot in the wilderness.

It took but a cursory survey of the interior of the cabin to tell the story of what had followed the conclusion of the fight. Here the basin filled with reddened water and with scraps of rags lying near; there the blue zinc trunk, cover thrown back and contents tumbled.

So the girl had ridden off with Zang? Well——

As he cantered through the purpling twilight on the long road back to Two Moons Original let his thoughts idly dally round a head crowned with dandelion gold and eyes the

color of deep mountain ice in shadows. Here, he reflected, was a girl the like of whom his limited experience with women never had shown him; here, too, an enemy such as he had never known.

The women of the Big Country — and they were not many — pretty generally fell into two classes: the colorless, work-worn women of the homesteads who came to town semi-annually, perched on the hard seats of farm wagons and whose listless eyes seemed never to see over the edge of a precious dollar; and those other women of the towns who wore red slippers in the daytime and played the piano o' nights. Neither class ever had touched Original even remotely.

But this Hilma Ring — this woman of surpassing beauty and the temper of a female lynx — what was there about her that sent a call deep into the primitive soul of a man? Or, as Original phrased it, "put the brand on a man."

Twice he had encountered her. On the first occasion smoldering hostility on her part had flared into quick anger; she had deliberately shot at him. Then this second vivid experience when he had found her at the battle pitch of

a she-grizzly with cubs, furiously lashing out with Zang's gun, ready to kill, insensate with the lust to kill. He, Original, had been forced to manhandle her in that battle back in the cabin to save his own life, yet in the height of conflict he had felt that strange call coming from the girl, that lure of the unconquered female.

Though Original was as innocent of feminine psychology as his horse Tige, somehow he sensed through instinct rather than deduced from reason that for the man who could conquer this tiger woman — break her as an outlawed horse is broken — triumph would be sweetened by a tremendous rushing from a wellspring of love.

Was Zang Whistler that woman breaker? The hazard that he might be sent a quick stab of jealousy to the range rider's heart. Why, he did not know.

"He sure is plumb welcome to her, Tige, if he can get her," Original tried to reassure himself in communion with the only confidant he had ever admitted to his heart's secrets. "But that kiss I busted into was n't comin' any too easy. She 'd creased that Zang fella from forelock to chin strap, an' it 's a fair bet she 'd bit

him if I had n't taken a hand into the game."

So Original Bill jogged on through the velvety dark toward Two Moons, and just beyond his saddle horn floated a dim vision of a girl with an aureole of yellow gold framing unconquered eyes that blazed hate.

Hours before the first light of the town glimmered over the top of the last rolling divide, resolution had taken firm root in the breast of the range inspector. He was going to meet up with this fighting daughter of the Vikings once more. If she had retreated to the Spout with Zang Whistler, all right; into the Spout he would ride, come one come forty, and he would bring out with him Hilma Ring and Whistler. The girl and her lover had won the first pot, Original grimly reflected, but there would still be another deal. It was not easy for one of Original's caliber to admit defeat; the very quick of his soul was galled by the outlaw's escape from a trap the range inspector had patiently spread for the head of the Teapot Spout gang of herd raiders. But deeper still rankled the thought that it had been a woman's hand that foiled the springing of this trap, that a woman had stretched him insensible when for long years no hand of man

had been quick or cunning enough to achieve that end.

"Tige, little hoss, you hear me make my brag. Day 's coming when you 'll carry double, an' that young she-wolf 'll be right here 'longside my saddle horn, spirit broke an' tame as a pet squirrel. Either that, Tige hoss, or you 'll have another rider."

Sioux Pass is the single gateway through the Broken Horns from the range country of the east into the high-basin country lying in the lap of three mountain ranges and caught up on its westernmost slopes to the very ridgepole of the continent. At the time this story tells itself the Basin had not yet come under even the shadowy reign of law that boasted dominion over the Big Country to the east of the Broken Horns; it was a No Man's Land where the trapper and the elk killer occasionally crossed the trail of a prospector; no train whistle broke the stillness of the high places. Into this wilderness the old outlaw trail from Montana to Mexico loses itself before venturing out to skirt Utah's Red Desert and follow the Colorado River to Nogales and the Line. Over this trail once rode Harvey and Loney Logan, the slayers of Old Man Lan-

dusky; its dim traceries through the aisles of the forest knew the lurking figure of Sluefoot Thompson, outlaw and train robber, before he lost his head down near Vernal, Utah. A paradise of hunted men was the Basin; its outpost and strongest citadel was Teapot Spout, just east of where Sioux Pass gives on to the rolling billows of the Big Country.

The Pass trail is a water-hewn alley gouged through the reluctant granite. For miles its tortuous way curves and twists about the shoulders of the mountains, dipping into box cañons where purple shadows clot even at the sun's meridian, rising steeply to skirt the precarious brinks of gorges which roar with the diapason of hidden water. Then the trail launches its culminating surprise. Suddenly the heavy curtains of the hills are parted, and the wayfarer stands upon the very proscenium of the Big Country displayed in its entirety.

A world of crystal light stretching out and out to unmeasured distances; light that is flawless and sparkling as a quartz spear; light which seems to carry a taste like water from a mountain spring. As Noah looked upon a clean, washed world so the rider on the high bib of the Pass's exit sees a universe untar-

nished, virginal in its fleckless beauty. Clean as the sea — like a sea caught and frozen in agitation — in this billowy infinity of brown and tawny and cinnabar red. Away and away, more than a hundred miles as man measures them, lie the purple headlands of the Black Hills. In nearer distance, yet two days' riding, the broken thumbs of Pumpkin Buttes push up from a saline desert; the telescopic atmosphere brings their serrated flanks into high relief; you see the runnels of winter's torrents traced in longitudes from blunt crown to spreading base of each butte. For the rest, north and south and east, just wave upon wave of grassed land, burned the color of a panther's coat by summer sun. Where the waves break into higher crests stretch lines of mesas, wind sculptured into fantastic cathedral columns. Meandering stream courses are threads of burnished silver wire, intermeshed, looped one within the other to make a broader strand, which is Powder River.

A clean world, a sweet world that Big Country! But on this day in June — the day when Zang Whistler and Hilma Ring rode together toward the Teapot Spout — somewhere in those interminable folds of warm brown earth

man was soiling the wilderness. Near two spots of smoldering embers the earth was drinking up the blood of slaughtered sheep. Here and there on the illimitable sweep other blood spots marked the slaying of men from ambush. Because one clan of men, the pioneers in this clean land, who had come with their herds of longhorns from the South to fatten them on the free bounty of Nature and glean an easy increment of wealth, now found their Eden disputed by a second wave of adventurers, rank growths of hate were springing from the soil of the Big Country. Because the squatter and homesteader strung his webs of barbed wire — killer of man and beast in the night stampede — round precious water holes and along fat river bottoms, and because the possessors of sheep bands demanded their share of the range bounties, now the day of violence, of reprisals and resistance was come to blacken what the world's first day had left clean and unsullied.

The sun was westering when Uncle Alf, the evangelist, rode out from the dim sack of the Pass and drew rein on this shelf above the Big Country. The self-appointed scourge of God had been coursing the wilderness of the Basin,

halting wherever a handful of men had gathered together in a settlement to preach his doctrine of twelfth-hour repentance on the imminence of a judgment day of bitter penalties. Also he had sounded his new bugle note of crusade against the Philistines of the cattle clan. He had ranged the forested tangle of the Basin, summoning its silent men, its hunted men, to cross the mountains with him and join a new Joshua's host which he would raise against the oppressors of the weak. On both counts his mission had failed to bear fruit. Dwellers in the Basin knew no distinction between cattlemen and sheepmen, hated them both because their coming inevitably spelt the peopling of the wilderness and the destruction of a solitude which asked no questions. Uncle Alf boiled righteous wrath over the utter baseness of those who were deaf to his exhortings.

"Let fire come down from heaven and utterly destroy 'em," was the prophet's parting valedictory for the recalcitrants who now lay shut behind him by the gate of the mountains. Then he let his rapt eye sweep the noble expanse of the Big Country like an unfolded scroll at his feet. The spirit of the wild seer leaped in tune with the sublimity there made

manifest. He saw in the leagues of tumbling divides stretching to purpling distances creation of Genesis fresh from the Hand that labored. All the heaving world below him and the pure depths of the sky rimmed over it seemed vibrant with the vitality of God. Only man was vile.

Uncle Alf turned his horse to the downward trail. From the depths of his chest came rumbling a song. Head back, eyes staring raptly at the blazing ball of the sun, the evangelist sent a great voice booming out into the silence:

That heavenly music! what is it I hear!
The notes of the harpers ring sweet on my ear.
And see, soft unfolding, them portals of gold;
The King all arrayed in his beauty behold!
Oh, give me — oh, give me the wings of a dove!
Let me hasten my flight to them mansions above.

As Uncle Alf took the dip down to the lower plain he saw far off a moving spot against the brown. It was, perhaps, twenty miles away. It was moving toward him on the trail to Sioux Pass. The wilderness preacher urged his mount into a canter, for he was expecting to spend the night at a ranch on the upper reaches of Teapot, and the sun already was riding the rim of the Broken Horns behind him.

Down dropped the sun and the quick dark of the Big Country came marching in a wide zone of shadow from the feet of the mountains. Uncle Alf rode on steadily. When his mind was not conning bits of Scripture and automatically pigeonholing them against the exigencies of one of the prophet's extempore sermons, it harked back to idle speculation as to the moving dot seen on the plain; why had not the horseman riding the Sioux Pass trail been met? What could have caused his diversion from the trail here in this country of no habitations?

Much solitude in the Big Country breeds clairvoyance. From the untenanted air, from the whispers of the silver birches in the stream beds come voices of the weird for the inner ear of the man alone. With Uncle Alf, who lived in constant communion with saints and prophets of an ancient day and whose mind was attuned to those rarefied wave emanations which bring a howl from the wolf and a snort of terror from the horse when man senses nothing untoward, there was a strong clairvoyant sense he named a calling. Now, riding alone and in the waxing dark, the man received a calling, warning him that the horseman

he had seen from afar and expected to meet was a son of Belial.

As surely as if human lips had uttered the words Uncle Alf plucked from the night the message: "It is the Killer you shall meet."

Every hair on his old head pricked up with rage and that danger thrill still surviving from the days of the tree folk. Even as his voice growled and muttered curses in his beard his gangling frame stiffened to the animal reflex of the battle call. His eyes sharpened themselves for peering through the clotted shadows.

"Behold, Boaz winnoweth barley to-night," he muttered, "and in the night season shall the chaff be burned entirely."

Three short, sharp barks from a coyote somewhere ahead in the dark caused Uncle Alf suddenly to rein in his horse. His ears strained themselves for another noise and at last they detected the shuff-shuff of horse's hoofs at an easy trot. They were still a distance off.

Uncle Alf whirled his horse about and made at a walk for the brink of a coulee into which the trail dipped a hundred yards back. Over the edge of this slash across the countryside the trail dropped precipitously twenty feet or more to the dry creek bed, then rose to take

the farther wall at a steep angle. At the bottom of this U-drop of the trail a tuft of cottonwoods ripped from its moorings somewhere upstream by a spring flood had lodged beside the trail; the trees were eking out a starved life in half leaf. Behind the cottonwood clump Uncle Alf drove his horse and waited, one hand pinching hard on the beast's nostrils to shut off a possible neigh.

The range preacher had no weapon.

Perhaps ten minutes of waiting, then a black bulk showed against the lesser dark at the edge of the coulee. A rattle of stones as the night rider's mount bunched his hoofs for the slide down to the bottom of the coulee. Just as the horse struck bottom Uncle Alf dug his heels into his pony's flanks and sent him crashing straight for horse and rider.

"Murderer!" screamed Uncle Alf. The other fumbled with a saddle holster, but before he could draw his rifle a snakelike arm whipped about his throat just as his horse staggered under the impact of collision. He was dragged from his saddle and held dangling, feet above the ground, by the garroting arm.

The one attacked had blindly held to his

bridle rein when he was swept off the horse. Now his beast, charging and plunging in a folly of terror, swung his flank viciously against the man's middle, catching his body and driving it against Uncle Alf's saddle girth. A strangled scream of pain and the struggling figure suddenly relaxed. That instant, too, Uncle Alf's saddle girth parted; the top-heavy saddle toppled, and the circuit rider went down to the stream bed with his prisoner. Both horses dashed down the coulee; the noise of their hoofs against the stones died to nothingness.

The instant he struck ground Uncle Alf rolled on top of the man he had grappled, ready to pin him down with knees and body while his hands went to the throat. But there was not a flicker of movement in the form beneath him.

Wary against a possible trick, Uncle Alf dared let one hand grope for his saddle and draw it close. The fumbling hand found and untied the picket rope from its place under the horn. Then very carefully Uncle Alf bound his man, giving him the hogtie, — bound feet canted over the back and noosed to the neck. When he had finished he lighted a match,

turned his trussed prisoner over and held the match close to a coarse face. Uncle Alf recognized the man whom Hilma Ring had named as the slayer of her father — the Killer.

"Look down, dear God. I, Alpheus, even I have brung a man of blood to thy judgment."

CHAPTER X

The gathering dusk that had fallen upon Uncle Alf questing the mysterious rider infolded also Zang Whistler and the girl Hilma riding toward the Spout. Their way was long; they had not departed from the cabin where Original Bill lay unconscious until mid-afternoon; there was no call to push their horses, particularly since the somnolent Christian Hilma rode refused utterly to break from a stiff-kneed trot long custom under his dead master had established as a maximum requirement of speed.

A capricious genius of the Big Country, delighting ever to mingle leaven of doubt and hint of insecurity with whatever joys she grudgingly permits her creatures, must have taken a teasing pleasure from Zang's state of mind during that long ride. For it was unstable as a weather vane, volatile as mercury under a clutching finger. When first Hilma

had given her assent to ride with him into the Spout a great triumph had swept over the man's heart; his pride of conquest vaunted itself. As they rode together across the swelling divides Zang babbled exultingly of the future, and the pronoun we held large place in his discourse: "We 'll give those cow outfits a run," and "We 'll show that Original fella not to sit into a game 'less he savvys all the pricks on the cards."

Once in his pride of possession Zang pushed his mount close to the stumbling Christian and essayed to slip a masterful arm about the girl's waist. His hand was met by firm fingers, which promptly disengaged the clasp. "Say ——" the man's protest began, but stopped there. Though Hilma's eyes were held resolutely to the front, a monitory tightening of the corners of her mouth carried warning not to be carelessly unheeded.

Puzzlement slowly began to oust confidence from the lover's mind. This was not the way a woman should act after she had given in to a man. No, sir! Any girl who had consented to have Zang Whistler for a sweetheart ought to warm up a bit. Any girl who was riding with him to the Spout ——

"Say, Hilma," Zang finally burst out petulantly, "what's the main idea? You're holdin' me off with a twenty-foot tepee pole like I was something a kiote dug up in a dry wash. Don't I have no — no claim?" The man ended his protest lamely under the level gaze of her eyes. All their accustomed chill of mountain ice — the deep dark blue of a hidden glacial lake — was there to shrivel Zang's dream of romance.

"Claim?" Hilma echoed flatly. "Claim?"

"Why, sure! You're ridin' with me to the Spout, ain't you? You've give yourself into my keeping, or I don't know the human language."

"Men are all foolish," Hilma laughed shortly. "All the time thinking about possessing some woman — owning her like they'd own a branded heifer. Me — no man owns me, Zang."

"Well, by the great jumpin' Jehoshaphat!" The leader of the Spout gang swept off his high-crowned hat and slammed it against his thigh. Nascent anger struggled with a whimsical humor in his eyes.

"Who said anythin' 'bout putting a brand on to you, girl? All I'm asking is, have you

got a little love in your heart for ole Zang Whistler; yes or no?"

"No," answered Hilma quietly.

Zang's bridle hand gave such a jump his high-strung little horse flattened back his ears and made a quick feint at sunfishing. The rider quickly recovered himself, stretched out a hand to Christian's bridle to stop him. Pulling his own horse to a halt Zang faced the girl squarely.

"Looky here, Hilma girl, 'pears to me like we might as well have a show-down right here 'thout each of us makin' a show of holdin' back the high ace. Answer me true; just how do you figger yourself — you with your little bundle of clothes on your saddle horn an' ridin' to Teapot Spout with Zang Whistler. I 'm putting it blunt an' plain as the business end of a sixshooter: Are you Zang Whistler's woman or are you not?"

A hot wave of color hung a danger signal in each of the girl's cheeks, and into her eyes leaped the fighting fire. Zang's heart cried out that never had this girl been more regally wonderful to look upon.

"You *do* know how to choose words. Zang Whistler's woman! That sounds pretty!

Back in the cabin I was a poor defenseless girl — an outlaw with a jail term ahead of me soon 's I got caught; alone in the world, helpless, with an indictment hanging over my head. And Zang Whistler out of the kindness of his heart offers to protect me — offers to take me where the law can't reach. Now — Zang Whistler's woman!"

"Hobble that line of talk!" Blazing anger now shook the man's speech. "You 've got no call to make out somethin' I never said, nor don't intend to say. I never — I did n't — oh, hell's fire an' hoop snakes! How can I say what I want to say? Over to the Spout there 's one woman already — she 's Lonny Taylor's lawful wife. I was aimin' you should live with her until — until somehow I could rope Uncle Alf to ride over an' make marriage medicine between us. Preachers don't squat under every sagebush in this country, an' you know it."

Zang dropped his hand from the girl's bridle. There was something definitive in the gesture; the freed bridle freed also the girl Zang had thought to be wholly his. Hers was the next move.

Hilma's eyes looked deep down into the

smoldering eyes of the man and read there the honesty she had secretly believed all the time she would uncover did she care to try. The soundness and wholesomeness of the man's love flattered her; instinctively the guile in her — birthright of her sex — had pushed her on to force this disclosure even though she was unconscious of the fact that her own stratagem had provoked cause for anger. Hilma believed she had every reason to feel that anger; so much, at least, had been genuine. As for the rest, the girl knew naught but cold selfishness had prompted her to accept Zang's offer of protection back there in her cabin. Even as she accepted, knowing the man would construe her act to be a surrender of love, Hilma resented his misreading of this spurious coin. So the feminine heart of her, unmoved as yet by any semblance of passion, had dictated a bargain whereby she should gain all without paying a stiver. That chance of a bargain still remained, she believed.

Hilma picked up the bridle and urged Christian into a trot along the way they had come — along the road to the Spout. Zang rode by her side. He was silent. The outlaw who had successfully built up his kingdom beyond

the law, who had dared the agents of the law to come and shackle him, this man of the wilderness was turning over in his inept heart the problem that is woman. Gladly would Zang Whistler swap shots with a sheriff's posse behind the brink of a coulee; with the lightest heart in the world he would sally forth in the night to stampede a herd and cut out a string of beeves under the rifles of their protectors; but this woman business — this she-stuff, as Zang termed it — was not his game. Like a blind cripple trying to ride an unbroken bronc, so Zang in his complete bewilderment summed his incapacity to cope with or fathom this fair antagonist.

Beneath the hard surface of the girl's complete selfishness a faint stirring of conscience began to make itself felt as she rode in silence by the side of this man who had sworn to protect her. Night was falling and nights brought stark loneliness to her. Perhaps this was the circumstance provoking belated protest of conscience; perhaps just the feminine instinct always to appear at the best in the eyes of a man. Hilma was faintly surprised that she should feel necessity to say more on a subject closed the instant Zang had dropped her

bridle. Never had she been accustomed to consider the sensibilities of others; never had she been in contact with the sensibilities of any save her father, and they were blunted to all but the coarser reactions. Yet——

"Zang," she said, a little hesitantly.

"What?" No encouragement in his barked answer.

"I told you back there in the cabin — when you asked me to go to the Spout with you — I told you I would, you remember, on my own terms."

"An' I'd have to wait your own good time to find out what your terms were," came the brusque interruption.

"Yes, Zang, I thought that way was best." Almost a shade of tenderness in the girl's voice now. The man strained his eyes to peer through the gathering dark and read her face; it was denied him by the gloom, lemon tinged by the last streak of fire along the crests of the Broken Horns.

"Please — please don't ask — or expect — too much all at once, Zang, and" — a faint ghost of a sigh in the near dark — "I'm sorry."

"Let everythin' ride as is. That goes with

me," the outlaw said simply, and again silence fell between them.

They were at the fork of the trail where one narrow horse path turns south to climb the heights into the Spout and the other carries on to the westward and Sioux Pass. Hardly had Zang's horse chosen the homeward path than a shrill whinny came out of the dark. This Zang's pony answered before the rider's quick hand could slip down and shut off the equine hailing sign, — a precaution that was automatic with the Spout outlaw. A clatter of hoofs out there in the dark, and a riderless horse came cantering up to within a few feet of the beasts the man and woman rode, circled warily, then cavorted off a short distance. The cayuse was followed by a second, more cautious, who remained out of sight but betrayed his presence by loud snortings. The horse they could see was saddled and bridled; faintly they could distinguish the stock of a rifle protruding above the saddle scabbard.

"Somebody's afoot," Zang commented aloud. "Wonder who?" He dismounted, uncoiled his reata from the saddle horn and strode off into the darkness. Hilma heard him coaxing the runaway to come into swinging dis-

tance of the rope; the girl was struck by the note of patience and kindliness in the man's voice, for in a similar task she would have lost her temper and failed of her purpose. Zang came back presently, leading the stray and with the second runaway meekly following after.

"Somethin' queer about this, 'specially away out here," he said as he threw one leg over his saddle and prepared to lead the roped horse. "That other bronc who 's playin' mousey has no saddle but a bridle on; this willowtail 's rigged right down to a muley in the stocking." A note of doubt crept into his voice. "Wonder if anybody moseyin' round the Spout met up with one of my boys an' had some sort of rukus."

"Look over there!" Hilma exclaimed and she pointed off to the west. Zang followed the direction she indicated and saw a small yellow spark against the blackness.

"That 's the fella who 's afoot," Zang explained. "He 's just beddin' down for the night until he can catch up his horse come daylight. Ye-ah, but if it 's one of the Spout boys he 'd know enough not to make a light away from home; we don't hang out a sign if night

catches us out from the Spout. Still an' all ——"

The outlaw was uncomfortable in the face of a mystery — perhaps a trivial matter of wayfarers who had lost their mounts, perchance something of graver import. Zang Whistler's instinct of protection did not permit him to leave unexplained any untoward circumstance in close proximity to his retreat.

"Reckon we 'll just swing over toward that fire an' see what we can see."

They swerved from their trail accordingly. Fifteen minutes' riding brought them to the top of a small rise perhaps two hundred yards away from the fire. They could distinguish two figures in the firelight, both close to the ground.

"If you 'll just stick here," Zang suggested, "I 'll ease up closer an' get a line on things. Don't be scared. I 'll not mix into any gun play if they 're not our kind — not with you along. If you hear me whistle come on."

He gave her the rope of the led horse and dismounted. With his bridle over his arm and his little horse carefully picking its steps after his, Zang disappeared. Hilma noted that he carried his .45 in his hand.

Alone once more, the girl felt the surge of the night fear sweep over her — that corroding chill bred of the vast spaces and the vault of lonely stars which had made each succeeding night since her father's death an age-long agony. Of a sudden this man who had just quit her side seemed precious beyond price. He stood between herself and all the unformed menace of the limitless wilderness that held her prisoner; he was for her a steady burning light in darkness.

How to hold him? Love, he had said; love was the price he had demanded. Did she have a little love for Zang Whistler; that had been his question. No ——

Oh, but yes! Yes! If love meant release from this grim spell of fear. If love were the giving of thanks for protection against the drive of unthinkable terrors, that could she give Zang. No other sort of love Hilma knew.

A whistle came to snap the girl's groping reverie. She saw the figure of Zang standing before the fire and waving her to come. So she rode fearlessly into the circle of light.

Uncle Alf strode to the edge of the dark to welcome her. His arms were spread wide in an ecstatic gesture.

"Be of good cheer, daughter!" he boomed in his storm voice. "For vengeance is in thy hands. Yea, through Alpheus, servant of the Lord, is the murderer delivered into the hands of the fatherless."

Hilma looked from the towering figure of the prophet over to where Zang stood behind a bound figure; a wide smile split the outlaw's features. Uncle Alf helped the girl to dismount and led her by the hand to where the trussed man lay on his side. With a lift of his foot he turned the inert figure over so that his face was revealed by the firelight. The girl looked down upon a blotched and scowling mask of animal ferocity; little eyes heavily overhung with puffed lids glared at her like the eyes of a trapped wolf; under a ragged mustache bestial lips parted to show yellow fangs.

"Well," snarled the Killer, "you blat, you mutton lover!"

The taunt galvanized the girl out of the shock recognition had carried. She screamed in fury and dropped with her knees on the Killer's chest. Her crooked fingers darted for his venomous little eyes. Before Zang's strong grip closed about her wrists wicked slashes of

red crisscrossed over the bound man's eyes. His jaw was dropped in terror.

Zang lifted Hilma, fighting, to her feet.

"There now, girl," he soothed, "that ain't exactly 'cordin' to Hoyle — not that the skunk don't deserve it, but he 's hogtied, you see."

"But he killed my father!" Hilma panted. "Shot him from behind. He has no right to live."

"Leave him to the vengeance of the Most High," Uncle Alf droned. "A great fire will wither him up entirely."

"But you 'll shoot him?" Hilma put the question to the evangelist in the innocence of a child certain of right dealing on the part of its elders.

"No, daughter. The Book says, 'Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord.' I 'll take this here man of blood to the court in Two Moons, which is the Lord's instrument of vengeance. 'An eye for an eye,' says the law."

"Then I 'll go with you," Hilma declared. Determination came full formed on the wings of impulse. It was born of the mastering idea that no possible trick of circumstance, no satiric stratagem on the part of this genius of the wilderness that was her enemy, should

cheat her of witnessing the visitation of retribution upon the head of the slayer. Caution was discarded.

At Hilma's announcement Zang started. His eyes questioned hers fruitlessly. Taking the girl by the arm, he led her a little away, out of earshot of the Killer.

"You 're sure not aimin' to walk right into Original Bill's arms," he urged tensely. "Not prance right up 'longside an indictment for assault?"

"That man won't dare make a move if I come into town bringing the Killer," Hilma countered. "He 'd be mobbed. Anyway, he does n't fight women in the open — where others can see him. What 's more ——"

"But, girl ——"

"What 's more, you know Uncle Alf. If he should be riding in alone with the Killer and thought he heard a voice telling him to let the man go, why, he 'd let him go and then prove from the Bible he did right. No, Zang, I 'm not taking any chances. Anyway, they 'll want me for a witness, won't they?"

The girl looked up to his eyes and saw a conflict there. A new tenderness, sensed once before that night, stirred her heart.

"You, Zang; you can't come, I know. It would be walking straight into jail. But — but, Zang, I 'll come back to you. I — I have n't much to give you, Zang, but I 'll try to — play fair."

He left her abruptly and disappeared in the darkness. When he returned he was leading the saddleless horse, Uncle Alf's runaway. A few minutes' work with a rawhide thread served to repair the broken girth, and Zang had the saddle in place shortly. The evangelist, willing enough to see his prisoner behind bars at the earliest moment, helped Zang lift the Killer back to his own saddle. His legs were bound beneath the horse's belly. Zang mounted his own beast and slipped the bridle of the prisoner's horse over his arm. He led the way back to that point on the trail whence he and Hilma had first seen Uncle Alf's fire. Hilma pressed up to him when the trail showed a dim line under the horses' hoofs and put out her hand to take the leading bridle.

"Good-by, Zang. Remember, I 'll come back."

"Save your good-by for another time," Zang laughed exultantly. "I 'm riding with you to Two Moons."

CHAPTER XI

THE dawn that broke over Two Moons following the events just narrated ushered in a day bulking large in the town's history. Even now when a frosty autumn night finds the old-timers assembled around the stove of the back room of Gotch's drug store — substitute rallying place in this day of the Great Drought — reminiscence inevitably swings back to that cardinal spot in the calendar of the past. Gnarled old range riders leap into heated arguments: Supposing Sheriff Red Agnew had done thus and so; what would have happened if Zang Whistler had not had a bullet hole through his shooting hand? Alas, the mutations of time! Modern Two Moons' old-timers review thus the high tides of romance in a golden age that has sped; the new generation goes down to the station to see the eight-four from Billings come in.

The early morning stage, in from Lost Sol-

diers on the railroad, brought to this core of the Big Country internecine strife a new and potent actor. Yet so consistently did this field general of hidden forces follow his policy of unobtrusive penetration wherever he went that none of the knot of townsfolk and cowpunchers, gathered to watch the stage halt before the doors of the Occidental Hotel, recognized him. Had any attempted to follow recognition with a hail the stranger doubtless would have stared him out of countenance and passed on.

A sleepless night in the swaying stage up from the railroad point had touched the newcomer not at all. His bland unbearded features were as fresh and free from insomnia strain as a schoolboy's. A very wide mouth seemed perpetually cocked and primed for an ingratiating smile, but the hard gray eyes of him denied the genuineness of this consciously displayed tag of good humor. He wore the uniform of a politician, — for in the Big Country the broad-brimmed black Stetson, the black string tie and flaring tails of the Prince Albert have assumed for the wearer all the distinguishing importance of a uniform. He was, moreover, a great joiner; pins or fobs of at least

four fraternal organizations glittered conspicuously from as many vantage points on his person.

"Warren J. Von Tromp, Cheyenne," was the signature he put in a sprawling hand upon the Occidental's register, and he went smiling into breakfast.

Now to Henry Quick, the Occidental's proprietor, this name carried nothing. Perhaps there were not more than half a dozen men in all the Big Country who would appreciate that the arrival of Warren J. Von Tromp, of Cheyenne, was a weighty event for town and country equally. If one could plump the question, "Who are you?" at Von Tromp with a fair assurance of receiving an answer even half truthful that answer might be, "I am a lawyer." In so far as a certain parchment upon the wall of Von Tromp's office in Cheyenne attested to his admission to the bar, that reply to the supposititious query would be truthful.

But only a modicum of truth therein. Warren J. Von Tromp was much more than a lawyer. His field of activity lay far beyond the confines of the State capital. Washington knew him better than Cheyenne, and he was not a stranger even to the Hyde Park Hotel

in London. Von Tromp's appearance in a court was far less frequent than in some locked room, some place where work along his peculiar line was waiting to be done. He knew the statutes, but better he knew neat and safe ways to subvert the statutes. Von Tromp had his own code of ethics. Never would he stoop to suborn perjury, for instance; he would arrange matters so that perjury was unnecessary. Not for worlds would he buy a legislative committee, but he was a master at devising circumstances conducive to the picking up of an honest penny on the parts of a committee's several members.

When he had breakfasted Von Tromp strolled out on Main Street and ambled down the row of store fronts. That smile of his which seemed ever trembling to be released rewarded the gaze of the curious. He even made no bones of looking at the numbers on the doors and finally turning in at a door giving on to a flight of stairs over the Boston Store. The landlady of the suite of living rooms there said Original Bill had come in very late the night before and was still sleeping. She pointed out the door of his bedroom. Von Tromp knocked and entered at the bidding from within.

Original, propping himself upon an elbow among the bed covers, recognized in Von Tromp a man he had occasionally met in the company of powerful members of the Stockmen's Alliance down in Cheyenne and Denver, — one of those mysterious figures on the inside of the councils of his employers whose business was beyond his own experience on the wide range. He apologized simply for his undress, saying he had had a long ride during the night. Von Tromp held up a suave hand to check explanations, seemingly in an impulse of absent-mindedness hung his hat on the door knob where it would cover the keyhole and drew a chair alongside Original's bed.

"Blunt," he began in a confidential tone, "I 'm not one to beat round the bush. I came to Two Moons to have a little talk with you — got in on the stage not an hour ago, in fact, here I am. Perhaps there 's no need of my mentioning any names — make it a point never to mention any names when I don't have to — but you 'll understand I represent some mighty important people — yes, some people of prime importance, Blunt — and what I have to say you may take as coming straight from them."

Original nodded slowly and reached to a

table for papers and tobacco. He divined his visitor would reveal himself shortly as bearer of some new message of strategy in the war of the range, something direct from headquarters. The first faint stirrings of dislike of his visitor began to prick under the alertness of the range inspector; Original resented an indefinable quality in Von Tromp's manner and voice, a something which seemed to set him in the status of a hired hand about to take his day's orders.

"I may say to start with that — ah — our people are greatly alarmed at the way things are going here in the Big Country," the voice of Von Tromp purled on. "They thought when they put the board-of-live-stock-commissioners thing through the legislature and had you appointed inspector for this county the wholesale rustling of cattle would cease. They relied upon you to exercise — um — a little moral suasion upon the sheepmen to keep them back from the cattle lands. Unfortunately, Blunt, neither of those hopes has been realized. Last fiscal year our people had to mark more than $150,000 off their accounts to the credit of cattle thieves. To-day, because of the invasion of the sheep and the taking up of claims by

homesteaders — every one of whom is a cattle thief, remember, Blunt — the available range for our people's stock is less than half what it was ten years ago. Absolute ruin stares us all in the face."

"Well, what can one man do about it?" Original was quick to resent the innuendo of responsibility the other had pushed upon him. "I 've had twenty-two men before the grand jury on charges of brand smoking this past year; indictments were found against just five of 'em, an' on trial only one of those five got a conviction. One man outa twenty-two! I deal myself nothin' but trouble when I go up against a sheriff who 's against the cattle outfits, a district attorney who 's elected by sheep money an' grand juries the sheriff manages to have drawn exclusive from the town."

"Just so — just so," the visitor from Cheyenne soothed. "Don't think for a minute, Blunt, our people have any fault to find with what you 've done. Perhaps they are inclined to wonder if you 've done all that can be done under the circumstances; that 's all — all that possibly could be done. When the courts fail to give justice, you know ——" He finished with a spreading of the hands and a sage smile.

Original drew a lungful of smoke down deep and gave Von Tromp his steady gaze.

"Well, when the courts fail to give justice — what?" Original queried bluntly. His visitor gave his shoulders a slight lift.

"Take yourself as an individual. Suppose you had a man arrested for breaking into your house and the courts freed him. Suppose you had that same man arrested the second time for the same offense and the courts failed to convict. What would you do to protect your property? That 's putting the question fairly."

"But I 'm an officer of the State of Wyoming," Original began. Von Tromp ignored his answer:

"You 'd make it healthy for that man to move away, would n't you? You 'd make the country too hot to hold him. Well, take the case of our people with their backs to the wall because of the rustlers and sheepmen ——" Von Tromp suddenly broke his speech and gazed reflectively out the window. He cast a shrewd look into the range inspector's face before resuming.

"I did hear something down at Cheyenne — just a rumor which circulates as rumors will — about somebody with a private grudge up

here in the Big Country who 's been sniping unpopular sheepmen and water-hole homesteaders with a Long Tom. Maybe you can tell me, just to satisfy my curiosity, what 's been the effect of this man's private feud; how — um — have people taken it?"

Original kept his unwavering eyes upon Von Tromp as he rolled a fresh cigarette and lighted it.

"Effect?" he echoed. "Effect 's been to raise merry hell. Everybody says the Killer collects for every stone found on a murdered man's forehead an' collects from ——"

"It 's a gross libel!" the visitor almost shouted. "No association of reputable business men would subsidize murder."

"That 's what I like to believe, too," Original added simply. Von Tromp quickly regained his aplomb.

"I merely cite that instance to show how a desperate man may sometimes be driven to take the law into his own hands when, as doubtless this Killer, so called, found it to be his experience, the courts fail him. Exactly! I gather in this case this misguided man's acts have intensified the feeling against the cattlemen through popular misconception of the in-

spiration for his conduct. Or, as you say, raised merry hell." Von Tromp sped a quizzical glance at Original. "But supposing, Blunt, certain people we need not mention, finding no relief from the courts, and their property being daily diminished by the rustlers and the pirating of the sheepmen upon the range rightfully theirs, should decide to take the law into their own hands — to make an example, you might say. Supposing it became speedily known that the agents of these outraged property holders intended to make no distinction between actual rustlers who steal cattle and piratical sheepmen who steal the range."

"You mean clean up the country?" Original asked.

"That 's a neat way of putting it," his visitor smiled. Original honed his stubbled jaw reflectively. He was of the cattle clan; its chivalry, its wild free code had been born in him; all the years of his life he had supported that clan's interests with fanatical devotion. With every other of his kind in the Big Country, Original had bitterly resented the invasion of the range by the low-caste homesteader and the woolly avalanche of the sheep; the any-

thing but equal administration of the law in Broken Horn County had sickened him. But, somehow, the proposal made by Von Tromp smacked of heresy. Just because it came from Von Tromp, the outsider, the log roller and fixer, — a man of cities and alien to the Big Country.

"Well, sir, if anything like that 's started this country surely 'll be cat-dragged from one end to t'other. There 'll be a fine hell stew brewed unless ——"

"But supposing the State authorities understand our viewpoint and — um — keep hands off while matters are being settled?" Von Tromp's cold eyes invited Original not to be a fool — to see, in short, that one Von Tromp would not be idle in the contingency under discussion.

"Well ——"

Von Tromp suddenly rose from his chair, walked to the door, removed his hat from the knob and violently jerked the door open. As if disappointed at finding no eavesdroppers he peered into the hallway, then closed the door and again veiled the keyhole. He came and sat on the edge of the inspector's bed, removing a letter from his pocket as he did so.

"To get down to hard facts, Blunt, I 'm here to give you orders. You 'll find this letter vouches for me and all I may direct. Immediately you are to begin working quietly among the cow-punchers and foremen on this range, picking the most careful men of your acquaintance and organizing them into a force that can be relied upon. Certain men are now down in New Mexico and Texas rounding up other men of action. When the time is ripe these men will be thrown into the Big Country to do certain work. Your men will be ready to coöperate with them. But first," Von Tromp waved an emphasizing forefinger, "first, before the competent men come up from the South, you have something else to do. You are to attempt to clean up the gang of outlaws in Teapot Spout."

"I was aimin' to do that partic'lar thing soon 's I could put ten or a dozen good men at my back," Original volunteered. "I 've got reasons strong and particular for wanting that Spout cleaned up."

Von Tromp again turned upon the range rider his oily smile.

"But here is the most important part of your instructions, Blunt. Attempt to clean

up the Spout. Put up a nice fight. Kill off a few of the Whistler gang if you want to. But fail in the effort to round up the gang completely."

"What!" Outrage cried aloud from the man's protest.

"I said to fail to do the job successfully. Fail to bring out Whistler or more than a few of his gang. The reason is simple. A State inspector does his best to break up by force a nest of outlaws after county authorities have signally failed in their duty of protection for cattle owners. But so powerful are the outlaws the inspector cannot make headway against them. Therefore the cattle owners are justified in sending into the country a force of their own, competent to clean up the elements of disorder protected by the county authorities and establish security. You follow me?"

Original, bewildered and with protest rising to his tongue, was forestalled by a clamor on Main Street. Doors banged, there were excited calls and the pounding of booted feet on the board sidewalks. Original leaped from bed and ran with Von Tromp to the window overlooking the street.

He saw a strange cavalcade passing slowly

up the street in the direction of the courthouse and jail. Uncle Alf, the evangelist, led on horseback. Behind him, all mounted, were three: Hilma Ring, with a rifle carried in the crook of her left arm, a villainous-looking man bound as to arms and feet noosed under his horse's belly, and Zang Whistler of the Spout with a bandaged right hand gripping his bridle, and in his left, carried easily on the saddle horn, a .45.

CHAPTER XII

The all-night ride of the Killer's three captors in from the remote foothills by the Spout to Two Moons had been a grinding ordeal for the girl at least. She had not tasted food since the morning before; many miles on the back of the scrubby Christian had taken their toll of her strength. It was Zang who had insisted they dismount a few miles outside of town when the dawn was first beginning to spread her jewels in the east so that the girl might snatch a few hours of sleep. This she did, her head pillowed on her saddle; nor had she thought to inquire of Zang's wound, which now consumed his whole arm with a slow and torturing fire. The Killer, grumbling against his bonds, had fallen into noisy slumber under Whistler's watchful eye.

The sun was an hour high when Zang roused the sleepers and directed the saddling of the

horses. Before they mounted Hilma drew him a little aside.

"You must turn back here, Zang; if you ride into Two Moons it means jail, a court trial, penitentiary — the end of everything for you. Please turn back here."

The big outlaw's tired eyes kindled under her gaze. Hard lines of determination etched themselves across his features. His old devil-may-care smile parted his lips.

"So you 're still aimin' to tie loose from me? Well, ma'am, that 's not an easy thing to do when Zang Whistler's mind 's made up to stick. He builds right 'longside you until that time when the preacher says: 'Do you take this pore sinner for better 'n' worse?'"

Hilma looked out to the carnelian and ruby east where a nest of clouds over the Black Hills had engulfed the sun. She was battling with an impulse to tell this man he was twenty times a fool to run his neck into a noose for her sake. The fleeting tenderness of the night before had sped with the coming of the day; Hilma was her old sure, hard self. There was no place in her heart for Zang Whistler or any man; yet a saving grace of pity for one who could be so devoted persisted.

"Zang, I never go back on a promise. I have promised to come back to you at the Spout. Won't you wait for me there?"

"What 's more," the man continued as if he had not heard her, "I 'm not taking chances on you an' Uncle Alf piloting this skunk down Main Street alone. You can shoot, but Uncle Alf 's not sure. I got my left hand still ready for business in case some of these cow outfits should start a rush before we get to the jail. Let 's be moving."

He arranged the order of march: Uncle Alf, unarmed, leading; Hilma, with the Killer's rifle, preceding the prisoner; himself covering the rear. So they traversed the two divides separating them from town and at a walk crossed the Poison Spider bridge. The wilderness road suddenly became Main Street. They were in Two Moons. Three long blocks away the bulk of the courthouse pointed destination.

Zang drew his .45 and held it ready on the horn of his saddle. He addressed the Killer in front of him:

"Just one sign of a break an' you get a slug between the shoulders. If any roach-maned friend of yours on the sidewalk starts dealin' himself into this game you get that

slug pronto. Just write that down in your little book."

Two Moons was just winding up the bacon-and-flapjacks hour. Storekeepers were sweeping out. The saloons were at the midway point between the lingering all-night trade and the morning thirst cutting. Few people were on the street. Few, that is, when the cavalcade crossed the bridge, but ——

A cow-puncher, taking his morning wash at a horse trough, looked up through streaming strands of hair, saw a woman of dazzling beauty with a rifle held carelessly in the crook of her arm riding ahead of a bound man, saw Zang Whistler of Teapot Spout coolly riding behind with his left hand ready for business. The cow-puncher emitted a surprised whoop and ducked backward into a saloon to possess himself of his gun. The clerk taking down the shutters from the windows of the Boston Cash Store stood open-mouthed at the spectacle, then dashed into a neighboring store to spread the word that "something 's doing — big!" Men ran hatless out of the hotel, from the saloons, out of the depths of livery stables. A rider who happened to be turning a corner at a sharp swerve almost bumped into Uncle Alf,

then pulled his bronc back on to his haunches and sat pop-eyed.

Every cow-punch in town recognized Zang Whistler on the instant. A few knew the name of the scowling man who rode trussed just ahead of the ugly muzzle of Zang's .45. But a very few recognized the white face of the girl who carried the rifle so easily snuggled into the crook of her left arm.

It would be hard to say whether the prodigy of Zang Whistler's daring to come to Two Moons stirred the town deepest or the sight of the strange girl escorting a prisoner. Surely something big was afoot. The Big Country had plumped a cardinal event smack into the lap of the town.

It was a withered little weasel in faded overalls — some nonentity in from a sheep camp — who exploded the biggest bombshell. He gave one searching look at the bloated face of the prisoner and then screamed for all Main Street to hear:

"It 's the Killer! Look at the —— —— —— !"

"The Killer! — the Killer!" sped the word from mouth to mouth down the double row of wooden awnings flanking the broad street.

The hunting cry had the baying timbre of the wolf pack. Women took it up with shrill voices. Main Street was seething.

Still onward rode the cavalcade toward the courthouse. Uncle Alf held his head high, casting an eagle glance from sidewalk to sidewalk. Hilma, every nerve taut as a drumhead, kept her eyes jumping from figure to figure along the route, watching for a single move of a hand to a holster. The Killer's face had gone fish white; he swayed slightly in his saddle as if under the assaults of sound waves become propulsive. Zang Whistler, come for the first time in his outlawry to the domain of law, rode easily and with the ghost of a smile lurking in his eyes.

The crowd fell in behind the heels of Zang's horse and followed to the courthouse. But at a respectful distance, for ever and again Zang would cause his horse to swerve broadside on to the hurly-burly behind and would run a swift eye over the forward rank. Always his .45 was resting easily on his saddle horn.

Sheriff Red Agnew in his shirt sleeves came tumbling out of the wing of the courthouse where he lodged — for he was chief jailer as well as sheriff. Him Zang greeted cordially:

"Sorry to bring in such an onery lookin' prisoner, Red, but it 's the best we could find. Folks call him the Killer. Uncle Alf here picked him up while he 's lookin' for specimens of human souls for his collection."

Red Agnew, moving in a haze of stupefaction, unlocked and threw back the heavy door to the jail yard behind a ten-foot spiked fence. While Two Moons stood breathless the Killer and his escorts rode in and the heavy gate banged behind them.

CHAPTER XIII

Hardly had the gate of the prison yard closed against the crowd when Hilma swayed in her saddle and would have fallen had Zang not pushed his horse to her side and caught her in his unwounded arm. The strain of that ride through town, following more than twelve hours in the saddle, had sapped the girl's resistance to the last nerve volt. For a minute she wavered on the border line of hysteria, then she straightened with a scowl stamped between her eyes, a scowl for her own weakness.

"That comes of being a woman," she whispered fiercely as Zang helped her to dismount. Sheriff Agnew's wife — a florid giantess with the features of a nursing sister — was now in the yard; she urged Hilma to "come in and get a bracer right this minute", but the girl would not quit the scene until she knew what might be the Sheriff's disposition not only of the prisoner but of Zang and herself. The

gate banging behind her, the high spiked wall and the barred windows in the side of the court-house building so near her, all these things of a sudden spelled menace, a threat direct against her. The spirit of outlawry that had grown within her these past few days of tumbled incidents was potent to make her believe the law's eyes could read outlawry on her features.

Uncle Alf was holding forth as Sheriff Agnew busied himself loosing the rope that held the Killer's legs under the horse's belly. Sonorously and with frequent interjection of Biblical quotation the evangelist detailed how the calling in the wilderness had directed him to the man of blood. As for the Killer, his ugly face registered manifest relief that the passage of Main Street had been concluded with no unhappy consequences to his person. He appreciated keenly what might be the temper of the town toward him.

"Now," quoth Agnew, "just you folks hop into the house with the missis and get a feed of hot cakes and some coffee while I lock this bird into a cell." Hospitality possessed his voice; there was no hint of a lurking sense of official duty which might carry beyond the disposition of the prisoner.

They were in the midst of a satisfying breakfast when Red Agnew came in and sat down at the table with them. He had to hear all over again the story of the Killer's capture. He was tremendously pleased.

"Strayman, the district attorney, is going to be mighty tickled over this," he commented, "and I reckon certain people down in Cheyenne who 've been settling lump cash for every stone found on a dead man's forehead are going to hunt cover. We 'll drag a confession out of this Killer which 'll bust the State wide open. We 'll have a whale of a fight on our hands to swing him off a gallows." Then, suddenly linking Hilma with the events that had made the Killer such a fat prize to the law's net: "I need not tell you, ma'am, your dad met his death while doing his duty. He was a good citizen, and I 'm mighty sorry he had to check in because he was serving the law as he saw it his duty to do."

Breakfast finished, a heavy embarrassment fell upon the little company in the cheery room. With the exception of the self-centered Uncle Alf, each was wondering just what the next move would be, how inevitable circumstances would befall. A much-sought-for outlaw un-

der a score of indictments breakfasts with a sheriff, then ——

"I see you got a game hand, Zang," said Agnew with forced comradery. "Something recent?"

"Oh, just what you might call a accident," was Zang's careless answer. "But the fever 's got in it some an' ——"

"I 'll just run round and fetch Doc Bowers over to give a look at it," the sheriff was quick to interpose. "You folks just make yourself comfortable; I won't be gone ten minutes."

"No call for you to take that trouble, Red," Zang ventured hesitantly; "I could amble over to the doc's an' then — come back."

"Not with that crowd outside, Zang. Reckon the town 's pretty fired up, and I would n't want you to get into a jam with some cow-punch, more especial since you 'd have to use your left hand."

Sheriff Agnew cast a covert glance toward Hilma, then let his eyes return to Zang with a significant lifting of the brows. Plainly he felt the presence of the girl a bar to plain speaking.

"I 'll just mosey outside in the yard an' see how my little hoss has stood up under a

purty long spell of work," Zang drawled. Agnew accompanied the outlaw out of the room.

"Well?" queried Zang, when they had walked down a hallway out of earshot of the dining room.

"Nothing to it, Zang. I'll have to lock you up," Agnew declared heavily. "You sorta caught me between wind and water riding into town this way. What was the main idea? You know I haven't been wearing myself to a frazzle trying to serve any warrants out against you — and I 've got enough to paper a room with."

"Well, you see, Red, I just had to do it. That girl ——"

"Oh, I savvy! Well, I don't rightly blame you, Zang. Fella would ride plumb into a Sioux war party trailing eyes like hers — and, say, that hair she wears!"

"Don't get me wrong, Red," Zang corrected. "I count 'bout as high as a trey spot in a sanded pack with her, but since her pappy died she 's sorta got in a jam with Original Bill an' I was aimin' to break trail for her through all this range war. Now ——" He lifted his shoulders and smiled wearily.

"You see where I stand, Zang," Agnew urged. "All the cattle outfits roaring their

heads off they can't get protection against your boys, can't get an even break with the sheriff or with the district attorney. If I was to meet up with you somewhere out in the country, of course I could say you were too many for me and got away. But when you prance right up to the jail, even riding herd on a bad man badly wanted like the Killer, why — there 's no choice for me. I 'll let you go back and stay with the girl until I fetch Doc Bowers if —— "

"No, do it now," Zang suddenly commanded. "I got no call to make any lingering farewells like a East Lynn actor in a theater show. But just promise you 'll steer her right if Original starts buildin' any trouble for her — which I don't reckon he 'll do, he not bein' a woman fighter. Come on, Red; all I ask is pick me out a coop not too near that Killer. I don't favor him none."

Ten minutes later Sheriff Agnew, alone, entered the dining room where sat Hilma and Uncle Alf with their sunny hostess, Mrs. Agnew. The sheriff made a great pretense of covering the circumstances of Zang's absence with a noisy command that his wife instantly bundle the girl off to bed; she could hardly prop her eyes open, he vociferated.

Hilma asked no questions. The fencing and sparring that had preceded Zang and the sheriff's withdrawal had been all too plain to her. She knew Zang was behind bars.

The girl suffered bustling Mrs. Agnew to lead her to a bedroom, apathetically watched her pull down the shades and put the coverlet into place.

"Right round the clock," the lady conjured with a monitory forefinger from the door. "Don't you dare show your face outside this room until you 've slept right on till to-morrow morning, or I 'll have Red swear out a charge against you."

Once under the covers, Hilma tried to focus her attention upon a review of the circumstances the morning had capped: Zang Whistler, who had refused to leave her side, now a prisoner of the law; she, homeless, friendless, penniless, in bed under a jail roof, and helpless did only Original Bill Blunt care to put his name to a warrant charging her with attempt to do murder.

This Original Bill with his mocking black eyes and that tantalizing smile — fighter of women, tool of the imperious cattle clan. Oh, how she hated him — hated ——

CHAPTER XIV

"WHAT is the meaning of all the excitement?" queried Von Tromp, looking down from the window of Original's lodgings upon the Killer and his escort on the way to the jail. Original, who had comprehended the significance of Main Street's prodigy in a single glance, was tumbling into his clothes at top speed.

"The man you were talking about — the Killer," his answer came muffled by a woollen shirt that was just slipping over his head. "Somebody 's just bringing him in."

What instinct it was that halted Original from being more specific as to the identities of the convoying party he did not know. Von Tromp's order for a pseudo attack upon Zang Whistler and the Spout gang rankled too freshly in Original's mind for him to volunteer the information that Whistler himself was that

minute boldly riding up Main Street. Besides, the range inspector was jarred far off his usual balance by the unexpected spectacle of this outlaw and bitter enemy of the whole cattle clan coolly cantering through town.

As for Von Tromp, Original's announcement that it was the Killer who was prisoner between the riders appeared to sweep him into a flurry of excitement. He whirled upon the inspector.

"You say that fellow who 's tied to his horse is the man who 's been sniping unpopular sheepmen and marking their bodies with a pebble between the eyes? Good Lord, man, I must see him — must get to him before the district attorney begins to question him. It 's tremendously fortunate I happen to be in town just the time he 's captured. Blunt, you must fix it for me to see this man at once."

Original, busy strapping his holster in place over his left breast, paused to shoot a searching look Von Tromp's way.

"Why do you want to see this stinging lizard so bad? Lots of other men in this town want to see him, too — lookin' up to a cottonwood limb from the end of a rope."

"I 'm not in the habit of explaining my

motives to any man," Von Tromp said stiffly, then in hasty afterthought: "The man certainly will need counsel. I wish to advise him of his rights and offer him my services. Therefore, Blunt, I want you to see the sheriff and arrange an audience for me with the prisoner." The man from Cheyenne flushed angrily.

Original was spinning the chambers of his .45, the hammer held back by a thumb which suddenly appeared to Von Tromp all too insecure in its hold. He slipped the weapon under the spring on the pad holster and donned his jacket before answering.

"Mr. Von Tromp, I don't borrow nothin' but bad luck and lightnin' and I never was raised a pet, so I don't make it a point to balk at most orders howsomever they come. But this time I pass. Looks to me like it would n't put new paint on your reputation nor on mine especial to have me dancin' up to Red Agnew an' begging an invitation for you to come down an' take tea with the Killer. Nobody knows you for a representative of — well, of certain people, but the minute they see me hooked up with a lawyer who wants to break into the Killer, they 'll know it 's true."

"What is true?" Von Tromp challenged.

Original stepped close to him and gave him the answer fairly between the eyes:

"That the people who hire you and hire me have been paying for little stones on dead men's foreheads."

The lawyer's face went white with rage. His wide mouth opened and shut like a landed mullet's in an effort to frame phrases for his wrath. Finally:

"Who has bought you, Blunt? Who has reached you with money to turn traitor to your people and accuse them of being hirers of murder?"

Original's voice dropped very low; several men who once ranged the Big Country had learned to their sorrow that when he purred thus his gun hand was about to leap:

"Mr. Von Tromp, my price is so high there 's no lawyer walking in tanned leather yet raised it. You 're lookin' white, Mr. Von Tromp — sorta fish-bellied. The air in this room's kind of close — for two."

Von Tromp read the meaning in the other's concluding words without ambiguity. He took his hat from the door knob and tramped downstairs to the street. Original, absently twiddling tobacco in paper between the fingers of

his right hand, watched from the window his recent visitor cross the street and turn in the direction of the jail.

"House pets like that ought n't run loose in this man's country 'thout a bell tied under their chins," he mused aloud. Then he, too, went down to the street, for Original knew the issues of this day would bulk large, and no man might foresee their outcome.

Into the froth of Two Moons' bubbling pot, near noon, rode another, bringing added spice to the already high savor of the broth of excitement. It was Woolly Annie, the sheep queen of Poison Spider, accompanied by her hopeful son Dolphus and a sheep foreman of forbidding appearance. Greatly altered was the lady's mien from that riotous mood of elephantine joy which had possessed her when she rode out of Two Moons a few days before. Her expansive features were clotted into a thundercloud whence lightning flashes from the eyes warned of a general low pressure and storm conditions. The set of her great span of shoulders and poise of her huge head both cried to Two Moons that somebody weighing about one hundred and ninety pounds and

wearing overalls beneath a courtesy skirt was on the warpath with her scalp lock roached.

The three pulled rein at the hitching bar before the Occidental and before she dismounted Woolly Annie called to an acquaintance on the sidewalk in a great voice:

"Anybody seen them two rickety doodle bugs, Timberline Todd and Andy Dorson, hidin' under a wet log hereabouts? For if anybody has, just lead me to 'em so 's I can take 'em apart an' examine into their systems, pronto."

Immediately a crowd gathered, for Two Moons was in a state of nerves this day and ready to stampede at the popping of a sarsaparilla bottle. Woolly Annie did not play upon the crowd's expectancy; she unbosomed herself immediately and in rumbling organ tones of wrath:

"Three nights ago, me playin' horse here in Two Moons an' enjoying myself like a newborn schoolgirl because I thought I did n't have an enemy in the world outside ten or a dozen I could name offhand, an' what happens? Timberline Todd, Andy Dorson an' ten other crawlin' kiotes from the cattle outfits ride out to my range on Poison Spider, shoot up two

sheep wagons before burning 'em an' then shoot down an' stampede two sheep bands."

The shepherdess of Poison Spider caught the glimmerings of an exultant grin on the face of a bow-legged man with chaps who stood on the fringe of the crowd. She pilloried him with a forefinger thick as a thole pin.

"Ye-ah, grin, you pore orphan idjit! Big joke, ain't it? Purty rich, I call it, to ride out to my sheep range an' bust up two bands of nigh onto twelve hundred muttons. Well, my men you shot at an' hogtied recognized five of your merry companions, an' if there 's a grand jury in this town with guts into 'em, a passel of sheep killers is goin' be inside Rawlins pen lookin' out before long. You!" — the lady's wrath nearly suffocated her — "hear me hang up my honk! Only thing the matter with this town, there 's not enough funerals, an' the funeral industry 's going to be flourishin' right soon."

A sympathetic murmur from the crowd caused the man with the chaps to erase himself from the immediate vicinity with some celerity. Woolly Annie stiffly dismounted and, with the fan-eared Dolphus and the black-visaged foreman as escort, she made her jour-

ney afoot up the street to the sheriff's office, a veritable pilgrimage of Dido crying revenge against the despoilers of her kingdom.

Not only did Main Street hear of the outrage against the sheep queen but — what was a far more potent appeal to the sympathies of the townsfolk — that one of the slaughtered bands had been the property of Hilma Ring, the girl left orphaned by the Killer's cowardly shot, the very girl whom that morning Two Moons had seen grimly riding in ahead of the murderer. Close to six hundred of her sheep had been either slaughtered or dispersed beyond all effort at a round-up.

Woolly Annie, in her turn, received news as startling as she dispensed: That Hilma Ring, together with Zang Whistler and Uncle Alf, had brought in the Killer; that all of them had entered the jail yard and none been seen since. The mother of the promising nine on Poison Spider's head-waters heaved a great sigh of relief at the information. She said her boy Dolphus had ridden over to the Ring home ranch on Teapot to tell Hilma of the moving of her band, had found the cabin deserted and evidences of a struggle therein.

Here was a fresh angle on the mystery of the

morning's cavalcade through Main Street. Signs of a struggle in the girl's cabin! Then maybe she had caught the Killer single-handed when he came to complete his work of wiping out the Ring family and single-handed had overpowered him!

Supposition became cold fact before it had rolled from two tongues. From eating house to saloon and saloon to general store the electric report sped. Cattlemen had slaughtered twelve hundred sheep in a night, half of them belonging to the Ring girl; Hilma Ring, alone on Teapot Creek, had been visited by the Killer and had battled him into subjection. Hilma had been wounded. The Killer had been wounded. Somebody had been wounded; had not Woolly Annie's boy Dolphus seen blood all over the place?

Two Moons itched and burned with a fever of curiosity. Yes, and deeper — away down in the throbbing heart of the town — a lava lake of bitter hatred began to heave and glow with fiery incandescence. A feeling of climax pulsed through the air like the play of electricity before a thunderstorm. Even with none to proclaim it, all who were not of the cattle barony sensed that the time for settlement of

scores was come; that the moment of hand grips with the forces which operated through the Killer and through the night slaughter of sheep was soon to strike.

Mild-tempered, bald-headed, little Squirrel-toothed Smiley, who was the proprietor of the Boston Cash Store and who sang tenor in the Two Moons Excelsior Quartette, was seen to enter Hopkins' hardware store and purchase a .45 with a barrel long as his forearm and a gaudy holster in Mexican-worked leather. Old Man Rogers, president of the Grangers' Bank, went out on the street and picked up two renegade cow-punchers to come and sit just inside the door of his establishment with their holsters moved round to the front — and Old Man Rogers was notoriously afraid of a giant firecracker.

The crowd that stood before the courthouse kept patient vigil hour on hour. No sign from the jail or the sheriff's office. Not a hint as to the four riders whom the swinging gate of the jail yard had swallowed up.

Woolly Annie was seen to enter the main door of the courthouse with her two attendant guards. She was absent from view about fifteen minutes, then reappeared on the court-

house steps. Fire was in her eye. As she trundled grandly down the steps she announced for all to hear that that pink-eyed little house rabbit, Orpheus C. Strayman, the district attorney, had said he was too busy to hear her complaint about the sheep moving, and that Red Agnew must be combing the kinks out of his whiskers somewhere because she could not find him. She opined that unless she got some action mighty pronto she 'd have to break into the jail.

The curiosity of the hundred before the courthouse was whetted more when the tall, frock-coated stranger with the numerous fraternal pins, who had come in on the stage that morning, elbowed his way up to the steps and entered the mute house of mystery. He was out of view longer than the sheep queen had been, and when he descended the steps a possum's smile betokened the charity he felt toward all mankind.

The crowd could not know that Warren Von Tromp's smile was a false signal set on the bleak cliffs of his countenance with purpose to deceive. The result of his fifteen stormy minutes with the district attorney had been a flat denial of access to the Killer and a terse invi-

tation to take his blankets and move to a mythical bourn of greater caloric intensity than Two Moons. Moreover, Strayman had chilled Von Tromp to the bone with the statement that the Killer had made a complete confession and did not want a lawyer until the time of his trial.

Von Tromp wondered and wondered if this were a lie. He yearned to believe it was. And yet he dared not let himself be convinced it was a lie.

One sign and another which his shrewd eyes noted in his progress back to the hotel forced him to the reluctant admission that Original Bill had been right in his refusal to stand sponsor for a strange lawyer come to offer his defense to the Killer. It would be distinctly embarrassing, not to say unhealthy, for the impression to spread through Two Moons at this juncture that he, Von Tromp, was on the ground to look after the Killer's interests. The man from Cheyenne quickly reviewed his interview with the district attorney to determine if by any possible slip on his part he had given that peppery official any clew to the identity of his employers.

Von Tromp sincerely hoped he had not. But here again he could not be sure. Stray-

man had impressed him as a blunt country oaf, but ——

Mr. Von Tromp, of Cheyenne, Washington and London, was in a state of nerves wholly surprising to one of his schooled temper.

Perhaps Von Tromp gave Orpheus C. Strayman credit for much more acumen than the little prosecutor possessed. One element in the man's make-up the wiser lawyer from Cheyenne completely overlooked: Strayman was careless in his handling of the spoken word.

For instance, after his fiery interview with Von Tromp, Strayman said casually to his assistant — A-Long-Drink-of-Water the town denominated this spare, rather sickly young man — "Something strange about that lawyer from the outside being Johnny-on-the-spot just when we 've nabbed the Killer."

That was all he said; perhaps that was the sum of what he thought, for this was a day big with mental explosions for Strayman. But when The-Long-Drink-of-Water went out for his noon dinner he whispered to a friend in the Rhinoceros Eating House the circumstances of Von Tromp's visit and quoted his chief as saying there was something strange about him.

This friend hurried to a saloon where the town worthies congregated and there rehashed the story with garnishment of his own. He quoted Strayman as saying: "Dam'd strange somebody got this lawyer on the ground so quickly." The accent was on the somebody.

Thence the ripple spread.

Original Bill had kept off Main Street all morning, for he sensed the temper of the town and he was not one rashly to tempt trouble. But his time had not been idle. In that sacrosanct upper room of the Capitol Saloon were several men of weight in the clan, and council was imperative. Original was with them. Also Timberline Todd and Andy Dorson. Original, catching an echo of the explosion Woolly Annie had touched off, had found the precious twain asleep in a livery stable and hustled them through back alleys to the Capitol's rear entrance and so to this innermost citadel of the cowmen. Neither needed injunction to stay put until nightfall.

To the men gathered about the green baize table Original recited everything of his interview with Von Tromp, coloring details not at all and recounting the lawyer's anxiety concerning the Killer as well as he could. It was

this circumstance and Von Tromp's vehemence in the premises that brought grave comment from the gray heads about the table, from men whose code had been ever open fighting and no shooting through the crack of the door.

"Somebody up high has turned bad — like a last year's turkey egg," was the opinion of one. "I just did n't dast to let myself believe all this time our folks was paying money for killings."

"An' look where it puts us here on the range," growled another. "We either got to turn against the higher-ups down to Cheyenne or make a play to turn loose this thing in jail, which most men shoot under a barn."

So the council of desperation progressed. Men who felt themselves betrayed by a different breed of men who knew not the clean code, the strong code of the Big Country, saw themselves on the covering line of the Great Retreat — and fired on from behind.

Into the room burst old Dad Strayhorn. He threw wide his hands.

"Hell 's bust!" he said.

Original was first downstairs and on the sidewalk.

Down the street from the direction of the

courthouse came the mob. It filled the street from gutter to gutter. Like the Wood of Birnam it came, all tossing foliage of heads and hats and arms upthrust. An ugly clamor of cries and bellowings swirled out from it.

Above the forefront of the mob appeared a grotesque and agonized figure, hatless, collar ripped and pronging upward like a horn, face bloodied, hands desperately gripped on something hidden by the heads below him.

The figure was that of Warren C. Von Tromp. He was riding the top rail of a corral.

Original saw all this in a glance. He stepped out into the middle of Main Street and stood there for an instant, right hand hanging easily from the lapel of his jacket. A figure alone in the path of the mob, dwarfed by it almost to pygmy proportions.

He began to walk slowly forward to meet the mad hundreds.

CHAPTER XV

The mob came on, tossing its helpless victim on the surf of its passions. Still Original stood, a stocky figure of cold defiance in the path of frenzy. He had shifted his weight a little to his right foot so that he seemed to slouch; his shoulders sloped slackly forward; his hat, pushed a little back from his brow, permitted the sun to strike down and illumine his smiling face. One with an eye not keen enough to note the underlying readiness for instant action in this careless pose would have said the bow-legged little inspector was about to strike hands with an old acquaintance met after many years' separation.

The front of the crowd wavered and came to a halt at about five paces from the solitary figure in the road. The single will was playing upon the conglomerate and incohesive will of the mob. That moment was come when the spirit of stampede in human kind is confronted

by a baffling personification of sanity and finds itself all at once thrown back upon itself. Original was quick to take advantage of it. He held up his left hand above his head.

"Boys, you 're goin' to let this man go. You 're goin' turn him over to me, and I promise he goes out of town on to-night's stage."

Quick reflexes played across the faces in the forefront of the wave of men: First dazed beginnings of comprehension, then sneering defiance. From the back of the mob came impatient surges forward, calls to know what was up, why somebody up yonder was stopping. Original continued to speak without passion, almost without emphasis.

"Let me tell you why you 're goin' turn this man over to me on the promise he goes out to-night. It 's because he 's a pore fool an' ought n't to be runnin' loose in this man's town. It 's because he has n't got the savvy the Lord gives to a yearlin' steer; because he 's no more accountable than a jack what 's eaten loco weed. You boys would n't go for to cat-drag a half-wit out of an asylum."

"He 's a lawyer representin' your dam'd cattle interests come here to hocus-pocus the Killer out of a noose, an' you know it, Blunt!"

The challenge came from a huge tower of a man who carried one end of the corral pole supporting the wretched Van Tromp.

"That 's what he told me this mornin'," Original answered without heat. "He told me that, an' he said something else to me which no man in his right mind could say and stay in one piece all together. That 's why I know he 's not strong in his mind."

This surprising confession on Original's part — admission of the true identity of the man on the corral rail — was not what the mob expected. For the space of a breath its leader was caught floundering.

"Ya-ah! All you lyin' cowmen stand together — range inspectors and lawyers." The challenge came from somewhere back in the core of crowded bodies.

"Go ahead! Give the runt a ride 'longside the lawyer! Come on, boys, dump 'em both in the creek!" The jangle of cries deepened into a roar. A thrusting wave from behind suddenly pushed out two wings of the mob to right and left of the center. They curved in to surround the solitary figure stemming the flood. Then lightning action.

Original leaped backward and the hand

which had carelessly hung from his coat lapel was a blur. Those who had surged out to surround him shrank back when they saw a cold, impersonal eye of blue-black steel swinging in a slow arc at the propulsion of Original's hand, saw the crooked thumb which held back the hammer so tenuously. The man who faced them was in a crouch, head down-drawn between muscular shoulders, eyes narrowed to the hair trigger of alertness. His teeth showed in a curious grin. Slowly, slowly that hand directing the cold eye of steel swung from the hip; that hypnotic black hole at the gun's end seemed alive, — seemed coldly and casually to be selecting a man who should be first to die.

"Boys," spoke Original, "there 'll be quite a crowd go with me — all pals in hell together. Who 's first?"

In a flash he had mastered the mob. Original sensed this; also he realized how brief would be his victory.

"Jim Hanscomb" — he addressed the giant who carried on his shoulder the near end of the corral pole, and his revolver's snout emphasized the selection beyond chance of equivocation — "Jim Hanscomb, you drop that pole — now!"

As if rattler's fangs had burned his flesh the giant leaped from under the burden-bearing rail. Von Tromp was pitched almost to Original's feet. Original, still covering the front rank, groped for the lawyer's collar and jerked him to his feet. Von Tromp swayed unsteadily until the inspector's left arm circled his waist. Half supporting, half dragging the wreck, Original slowly backed to the sidewalk and to the Capitol's door. The door was opened from within, and hands caught Von Tromp to snatch him in. Original leaped in behind him.

The door slammed. The bar Dad Strayhorn dropped across it was just in time to catch the strain of bodies hurled against the heavy panels from without. A club crashed through one of the windows.

The dozen or so beleaguered cowmen in the saloon closed round Original and Von Tromp and rushed them toward the back door, which gave on to a corral and feed lot. Several saddled ponies were tethered to the bars there. Two cow-punchers mounted and Von Tromp was half lifted to the back of a third horse.

"Ride him to J. C. Ranch and hold him there for the stage," was Original's command

to the convoy; then to Von Tromp, in biting accents, "An' you tell the people down Cheyenne way we folks on the range here don't sit into no game with hired killers and tin-horn lawyers."

So Warren C. Von Tromp, playing nip and tuck with the first of the mob to stream round a far corner of the alley, went away from the scene of a vivid and novel experience. A sadder, perhaps, but not a whit a wiser man.

The mob spirit, which had coalesced about the person of the lawyer on mere rumor and found itself cowed for the minute and cheated of a victim, soon was blown upon by a great wind of provocation. Uncle Alf, who had snatched a few hours of sleep in Sheriff Agnew's quarters, awoke in mid-afternoon refreshed and filled with a great zeal. Unconsciously he dodged restraint by Agnew, who feared to have the evangelist abroad to carry with his fiery tongue tinder to the temper of the town; Agnew was busy with the district attorney, arranging for the summoning of an extraordinary grand jury to indict the Killer when Uncle Alf shook sleep from his eyes and prepared to preach crusade to Two Moons. Mrs. Agnew, instructed to "herd the old hell-

roarer away from the street," Uncle Alf waved aside with a tolerant hand.

"The grapes of wrath are heavy in the vineyard, sister," he droned in his high nasal whine. "Alpheus, servant of the Lord, goeth forth to the harvest."

Forth he went; straight out of the jail door and down the middle of Main Street. He was hatless. His heavy mane of snowy hair lifted high from his forehead and fell over his ears to mingle with a cascading beard. From the tangle of beard his eyes, deep-set in hollows under a hawk's beak of a nose, glowed hot as slag in a retort. He strode raptly, as one following some sign in the heavens; his head was tilted back, and his gnarled old hands were stretched before him as the hands of a groping child in the dark. A fearsome man out of the wilderness, he; another John Baptist, come to cry: "Make straight the way." In Main Street's inflamed imagination the appearance of this apocalyptic figure carried the awesome savor of divine intervention; here was the raw spirit of the wilderness made manifest.

Uncle Alf strode down the middle of the street a full block, seeing no one, seemingly unconscious of the presence of any man. At

the first corner he paused and shot both arms high above his head.

"Woe!" he screamed in a terrifying falsetto. "Woe to the taskmasters!"

He could make no forward step, for now the crowd was about him, pressing close, volleying questions: Where was Zang Whistler; what had become of the girl with the yellow hair; and what of the Killer? Uncle Alf professed to be aware of the crowd's presence for the first time. He looked dazedly about the ring of intent faces. He swept his hand through his beard.

"Are ye avengers of the blood of the innercent?" he demanded thunderously. Eagerness prompted assent even from those who did not grasp his meaning. "Then," commanded the evangelist, "prepare ye for the day of reckoning, for I, even I, Alpheus, servant of the Lord, am sent to lead against the might of the usurpers. Their murderers lurk in the hedges, an' their horned cattle tromp down my people's corn. My sheep they slay in the night."

Impatience had to abide Uncle Alf's circumlocutions and restrain itself to interpret his phraseology in terms of the present, but in

time Main Street had his whole story of the calling which led him to the Killer and how Hilma and Whistler had come out of the dark to help him bring the murderer to justice. The girl, he told them, was sleeping in the sheriff's house; the Killer was behind bars; as for Whistler, he was not sure what had become of him; he had been swallowed up. Urgings produced nothing more specific than this in regard to Whistler, plainly the hero and darling of the town.

Uncle Alf irked when he was drawn from his mood of rapt exhortation, and he returned to it as speedily as he could. Here was none of that indifference to his call for crusade he had encountered among the Basin's silent folk; here, his preacher's quick sense of gauging an audience told him, was, in truth, a stringed instrument for him to play upon. The wilderness seer launched upon his most terrific jeremiad against the cattle barons. Somebody had whispered to him the fresh tale of the sheep moving on Poison Spider; that Hilma Ring had lost six hundred sheep in a night. The shrewd exhorter snatched at this for a text: How the oppressors of the small people had robbed this lily among thorns — so he de-

nominated her — first of her father, then of her substance.

"With these hands" — he shook them high above his head — "with these hands I made the coffin for to bury Ole Man Ring in, whiles his orphan darter digs the grave among God's wild bloomin' flowers that 's to contain his poor clay. An' there — there, my brothers, out yander on Teapot Creek, where the ravenin' wolf whelps his kind an' the buzzard of the air calls to his mate from on high, I left her alone under the protection of a pitying God."

In the lump of the mob conscience Uncle Alf's bitter leaven worked swiftly and with a sure ferment. Shadows lengthened across Main Street, and still he talked. Orange and purple twilight came flooding down from the dike of the Broken Horns, yet that organ voice pealed on. Main Street seethed.

Near dark certain men whom the sheriff had tapped on the arm and summoned to his office — twenty in all — appeared suddenly on Main Street in front of the courthouse. Each had a white handkerchief tied about his right arm. Each carried a rifle.

Near dark, too, groups of riders began to converge on the roads leading from the Big

Country into Two Moons. Strong men, desperate men, to whom had come word of events in the town. Men of the cattle clan from all the ranges were riding to town to see what they could see.

CHAPTER XVI

Hilma Ring did not obey Ma Agnew's injunction to sleep round the clock. On the contrary, long before the dictated span, she came broad awake with that wrenching jar back to consciousness which leaves one trembling and with a fear shadow inherited from our ancestors, the tree folk, — a vague terror of things unseen in a half-formed world. Suffocating darkness engulfed her. Not a ray of light anywhere. Not a sound. No tangible bound of demarcation between the world of unconsciousness and the domain of sentient life.

The waking terror abided with her as she lay moveless and forced her mind to orientate itself there in the blackness. Bit by bit the pictures of past days' adventures fell into a pattern as bits of glass in the barrel of a kaleidoscope emerge from chaos to geometric exactness. Particularly did the events just preced-

ing her sleeping bulk large and assume significance unguessed when her mind was numbed by fatigue and the strain of convoying the Killer through Two Moons' Main Street. As the girl lay in bed, drawing long, slow breaths — the conscious act of breathing assisted her to confirmation of the belief she really was awake — as she lay thus, her mind leaped to find deductions for the present out of the immediate past.

She was under a jail roof, or she had been when she went to sleep, and a groping hand identified the bed as the same in which she had laid herself down. Zang Whistler also was under the same roof, but behind bars; of that the girl was certain. This big-voiced sheriff with the suave manner of hospitality had spirited Zang from the breakfast table to a cell without even permitting Zang a farewell word with her. Then right away he had insisted she should go to bed.

Hilma's body suddenly stiffened under the thrust of a thought powerful as a blow. She was in jail — arrested!

There could be no doubt about it. The suave sheriff and his wife simply had conspired to effect the trick without a possible scene, first

removing Zang Whistler beyond power of protest, then neatly trapping her.

So Original Bill Blunt, the range inspector, had indeed sworn out a warrant against her as Zang had said he might; assault with intent to kill,—was that the way Zang had said it would read?

The girl leaped from bed and began groping. Her hands encountered a wall. Noiselessly she felt her way, hand over hand, along this wall. The stiff cambric of a window shade touched her fingers. She pulled one edge away from the window and looked out. A window, sure enough, framing lighter dark without by its sash. She could see lights in a house some distance away and the faint line of willows along a creek bed. Also, she noted there were no bars across her window.

Absence of bars did not shake her belief she was a prisoner. Evidently, Hilma reasoned, there was no provision for women prisoners in the jail, and the sheriff had locked her in this room temporarily, trusting to her innocence concerning his intention to hold her as sufficient assurance against escape.

The panic that gripped her slowly gave way to determination to escape while opportunity

offered. Hilma did not know what the hour might be; the lights she saw through the window indicated it could not be after midnight, at least. She guessed the sheriff and his wife were abed. There was a chance.

Very gingerly the girl raised the shade just enough to lighten the solid blackness of the room. By this uncertain light she groped for her clothes and hastily donned them. She wondered what had become of her precious bundle, — the apron-bound tin box containing her father's sheep books and the photograph of a bridal couple. Wherever it might be, no chance to look for it now.

Fully dressed, Hilma stepped to the window and groped for the lock. She cautiously threw it back and raised the window by inches, shrinking at the dry squeaking the sash made in its groove. Now she had the lower sash raised full length. She leaned over the sill and looked down. Perhaps ten feet below was the darker shadow of the ground. She carefully climbed through the window, lowered herself by her hands gripped on the sill, swayed for an instant, then dropped.

Just as she landed in a heap on the ground, the girl heard a rifle shot, sharp and clear; then

another and another. The fusillade seemed to come from the other side of the courthouse building — from the street side. Hilma decided she had let herself out of a room at the rear of the sheriff's quarters, for there was no fence in sight, just prairie.

Now a single hoarse cry and two more shots; then the sound of rapid hoofs.

Hilma bent double and started on a run for the distant line of willows marking the creek's course. She had no definite plan except that of the instant, which was to put as much ground as possible between herself and the jail. Her fear-goaded imagination credited the shots to the sheriff's discovery of her escape; he was summoning a posse or something like that to scour the town in search of her.

She came stumbling through the dark to the first fringe of willows and fell panting into their black shadows. Momentary relief was hers, but when, on looking back to the dark pile she had just quit, the girl saw a light flashing from window to window on the ground floor, black terror engulfed her again. Now she was certain Agnew had discovered the untenanted bedroom, the opened window.

Where could she hide? What was her next step? Like a trapped lynx the mind of the girl roved madly at the end of a short chain, a pitifully short chain of circumstance. She was afoot and more than thirty miles from that little cabin on Teapot recently abandoned so carelessly but this instant seeming precious sanctuary because beyond reach. She had not a friend in Two Moons; there was none in Two Moons she knew except Original Bill, and he was the author of her present abysmal distress. If she remained anywhere in the vicinity of the town she would be caught and locked up in a more secure restraint than what she had just escaped. But how to get back to her cabin, or even to Woolly Annie's home ranch on Poison Spider, where protection might be given her because of the business association that existed between the sheep queen and her father?

There was but one way — a desperate way. That one Hilma determined to pursue, come what might. She started to follow the stream's fringe of willows to that point where the creek made a wide bend in toward the town and passed under the bridge at the far end of Main Street. The intermittent popping of

revolvers and snappy answer of rifles punctuated her gropings and stumblings among the willow roots. Nearer and nearer she drew to the black cardboard shapes which represented Two Moons. More vicious became the firing.

CHAPTER XVII

THE sun had gone down that night upon a town thirsting for action. Two Moons was like a fever patient in whose veins has accumulated all the virus of fantasy and disordered imaginings and who approaches that zero hour of the ultimate combustion of every atom of the contagion. Its imagination had been fired by the early-morning appearance of the Killer between a girl of startling beauty and an outlaw head of a modern Robin Hood band. This imagination easily was transformed to the kinetic call for action when Woolly Annie came to town with her plaint of a new outrage done, when Uncle Alf conjured the voices of ancient prophets to urge a liberation from the bondsmen. The trick of psychology which Original Bill had turned to his advantage wherewith to rescue a hated representative of the cattle barony from summary vengeance was the final provocation of explosion.

The twenty deputies with white handkerchiefs marking their arms and rifles in their hands whom Sheriff Agnew had placed before the courthouse and jail served to point an arrow to the logical course of action. If deputies guarded the jail it was because the law — whom Agnew served theoretically at least — considered something in that jail precious enough to protect against possible mob madness and preserve for its own due and mysterious courses. Who, if not the Killer?

The first answer to the unspoken query came from the mouth of the nondescript waif of the sheep range who had been first to recognize the Killer and announce his identity on Main Street that morning. Foot on rail and glass of whiskey in hand, the little prairie weasel had with much gravity propounded this truth: "Yes, sir, gents, I says the sooner the Killer 's lookin' up a rope the better it 'll be all round, law or no law."

From so humble a source speculation waxed and grew into conviction, practically unanimous, that the shadowy thing called law — none too solidly established in the Big Country — would appreciate the favor of having a murderer taken off its hands and executed forth-

with. The corollary instantly becoming patent was that the law really did not have a grudge against Zang Whistler; wherefore, should he be found anywhere around the jail he would be turned loose.

One man at a bar turned questioningly and looked into his neighbor's eyes. Heads nodded gravely. A few words were spoken. One by one men began to sift out on to the street. From saloon and shop they came, gathering in little knots in the deeper shadows between the bars of yellow light laid down on the wooden sidewalks in grotesque mosaics. The giant who had quailed before Original's threatening gun came from his blacksmith shop carrying a heavy sledge and with a cold chisel tucked under the binding thong of his leather apron. Him the men greeted as a leader. He passed from group to group, merging them into a solid core behind his back.

Within half an hour there was a blot of men on Main Street stretching from curb to curb, — townspeople, small farmers in from their homesteads on the prairies, sheepmen whose flocks, like Wooly Annie's, had been despoiled in times past or whose herders had been found in some lonely coulee with a stone between

their eyes. Woolly Annie herself, minus her skirt of courtesy and with a borrowed shotgun in her hands, was in the fore; her boy Dolphus she had put to bed in the Occidental, and his trousers she had carried off and cached to insure his keeping out of trouble.

Slowly the blot in Main Street moved toward the black loom of the courthouse at the street's far end. No light there; just the indistinct picket line of the deputies drawn across the approach to the building.

A flying horseman, like some restless night bird of the wilderness, swerved round a corner ahead of the mob, dragged his mount to his haunches, spun him round as on a dollar and was thundering down a side street almost before those in the front rank of the marchers could be aware of his presence. This scout shot down a dark alley and came to the feed lot behind the Capitol Saloon. The dim, barred yard was populous with other mounted men. Here had gathered the riders in from the cattle ranges, — hardy men, desperate men of the clan who had caught under the banners of the sunset away out yonder word of big doings in town and had come winging in to see what they could see. Men of the rear guard

of cattle land they, set to hold against the enemy in the Great Retreat, to contest every inch of ground, to harry and bulldoze and scourge the enemy of their kind at every opportunity.

Big men, strong men of the Big Country; once riders of an unfenced prairie from Brazos to the Line; fighters of Indians and of blizzards; hard in life and hard to kill; builders of empire. Their clan has long passed. Their code of a fair shot and survival of the quickest trigger is known no more. Only the Big Country they made out of the prairie remains, — and memories which flash sometimes grotesquely, sometimes in exaggerated caricature on the cinema screen or from the typewriters of steam-heated novelists.

The scout from Main Street reported what he had seen. There was brief council, men crowding close to catch the signal for action.

"We can give 'em a run. If a bunch of us holds 'em off in front maybe somebody can bust into the jail from behind an' cut that Zang Whistler bird outa the herd. Leave the Killer be; nobody wants to dirty his hands with no carrion hound like him."

A plan was formulated. Out over the low-

ered bars of the Capitol's feed lot rode twenty horsemen, divided at the bars and were swallowed in the maw of the alley. One party rode in a wide swing by the creek to get behind the jail; the other went at a walk through a scattered street of houses to come in and catch the Main Street mob on the flank.

The head of the mob on Main Street came to the picket line of deputies stretched before the big building which housed the jail; came to the line, wavered and halted. Suddenly the big figure of Red Agnew appeared on the courthouse steps behind his deputies. He held up a hand:

"Boys, I know what you're here for. You've come for the Killer. Boys, you can't have him. He don't belong to you; he don't belong to me. The law owns him, and I promise you the law'll give him what he deserves. Don't go for to spoil the fair name of Broken Horn County with mob law, because——"

A shot from the cross street that cut Main Street along the courthouse front. A shot and the rush of horsemen bearing down breakneck upon the mob and the picket line of deputies.

A solid galloping core, launched straight at the mass before the courthouse, came on irresistibly. Like standing grain under the lash of a great wind the mob bent and parted. Clangor of cries. Shots. Rataplan of hoofs. Then the whirlwind had passed.

Surprise had been absolute and stunning. Had the courthouse walls suddenly pitched upon the heads of the mob the effect could have been no less bewildering. Out of the dark a thunderbolt had come whizzing and passed into the dark again.

But in a moment Two Moons' folk gathered their senses. Boiling rage seethed through the crowd that reassembled. The sheriff's deputies forgot their sworn duty and broke their line of defense across the path to the jail; they mingled with the rest, rushed blindly down in the direction the attackers had disappeared, firing into the dark. Other men with rifles faced themselves in a line across the street whence the attack had come, prepared for a second avalanche.

"They 're after the Killer! The cattlemen have come to run off the Killer!" was the alarm that swept across the bobbing heads.

The boldness of the enemy fired still further

the mob's rage. That the cattle clan should dare attempt to cheat them of the murderer the people of Two Moons had come to get was provocation to madness. A segment of the crowd swept against the big gate giving on to the jail yard; it went down with a crash. Men streamed into the jail yard and up to the locked door beyond.

That instant the horsemen who had driven through the press like a spearhead attempted to repeat the maneuver. They were met with a scattering volley which halted them in the dark. Stabs of red through the night were answered by vicious stabs. Uproar settled about the courthouse.

At the first charge of the horsemen Sheriff Agnew had stumbled back through the courthouse door. He ran gropingly to the corridor leading to the jail, mounted an iron flight of steps. A twist of a key let him into the outer cage of the cell house, separated from the inner blocks of cells by a wall of steel bars; a corridor ran the length of the cell house beyond this barrier. Agnew unlocked the door giving on to this corridor.

"Zang!" he cried. "Zang!"

"Here yu' are!" came a voice from the

dark. Agnew guided himself with a lighted match to the cell the outlaw occupied and with a special key turned the lock. Whistler stepped out into the corridor at the sheriff's beckoning and followed him down to the door through the outer barrier. Agnew pushed him through and then locked the gate behind him.

"Hey!" was the hail out of the dark wilderness of steel; it was the Killer's voice. "Hey, sheriff, don't I come in on this? You 're not goin' to leave me here, sheriff, with that mob bustin' in to get me?"

"Maybe you 're safer than you think right here," was the cryptic comfort Agnew called back to the only remaining occupant of the cage, and he drew Whistler with him out to the head of the stairs, whence his voice could not carry to the wretch left behind.

"Zang, there 's hell to pay, as I reckon you 've been hearing. The town boys 're aiming to break in and get the Killer. A bunch of cow-punchers is tied into 'em with the idea, of course, of freeing the Killer and nabbin' you. If the cattle outfit should win out you 'd be a goner, Zang." The outlaw chuckled. "I 'm sorta violatin' my oath to do this, Zang,

but I 'm going to take you down to my own quarters and ask your word you won't make a break 'less you know the cowmen win out and hear 'em making a search for you. Then — well, the windows are n't barred, Zang; you can take a chance."

Agnew felt the other's hand groping for his.

"Thanks, Agnew, you 're white. Where 's the girl? I don't want her mixed into all this."

"Why, she was asleep in the missis' room," Agnew replied. "You just step in here." He opened a door and pushed Whistler into Stygian darkness. "Don't make a light. I 'll go find the girl and bring her in here until we see which way the cat 's goin' to jump outside."

Whistler, groping for a chair, heard the sheriff's retreating footfalls. Then came to his ears a crashing of wood somewhere outside and the thunder of blows upon a door. Zang felt along the wall until his hand encountered a window sash. He pulled aside a shade and looked out. A part of the street before the courthouse was revealed to him. He saw a turbulent boiling of dim shapes there, the occasional spit of a rifle.

Zang waited.

Agnew, with a hastily snatched lamp in his hand, first directed his wife through the corridors of the courthouse and out of a side door, bidding her turn to a near-by house for shelter. Then he hurried back to the living quarters and to the room where Hilma had been put to bed. Just as he opened the door and his quick eye told him the bed was empty, a leg was thrown over the sill of the opened window and the figure of a man pitched into the room. Instantly another man's hands appeared on the window ledge.

"Timberline Todd! What——" Before the sheriff could set the lamp down and reach to his holster, the gaunt cow-puncher had lurched into his midriff. Down they went. The light crashed out.

"This way, boys!" Agnew heard the sibilant whisper from the direction of the window. "We got Red an' his keys."

Agnew fought desperately. He felt bodies hurled upon him. Fingers groped for his throat. Something struck him on the head, and he knew no more.

Through the window Hilma had left open in her flight ten of the cattle clan came tum-

bling. They searched the unconscious Agnew, found his keys and started on an uncharted way through the dark for the jail.

It was then the mob from the street broke through the jail door and swarmed into a broad passageway leading to the flight of iron stairs to the cell house above. Somebody carried a lantern high above his head. That was the only light. It went pitching and tossing over the surf of heads thrusting up the broad staircase.

A door on the second landing was opened just as the vanguard of the mob was turning a newel post for the final rank of steps to the door of the cell house. Timberline Todd, with the keys to the cell house in his pocket, took one startled look at the bobbing lantern and the close-packed scores of men it shone upon, then banged shut the door and turned a key in the lock.

"All off, boys," he shrilled in a half whisper to those behind. "They 've beat us to it. We better vamose while we 're all in one piece."

So back through the sheriff's quarters and to the opened window the retreat of the cowmen carried them. Their way led past a closed door, beyond which the one they had come to

find waited in the dark. Just an unlocked door between Zang Whistler and the men who had braved all Two Moons to capture him.

In the dark cell house, meanwhile, the final dénouement of the town's day of climaxes was come to its moment.

The head of the mob streamed through the door leading from the stair landing into the great room filled with a shadow web of ranked steel. The narrow space between outer wall and the close-set fence of the cell block was theirs to possess, but a locked gate and beyond that a locked door to a cell separated them from their victim. For the first time this modern cell arrangement, which had been one of the cardinal points of pride in Two Moons' vaunting of a new courthouse, appeared a disadvantage.

"Where 's Agnew?" some one yelled. "Make Red give up his keys." A dozen hands fruitlessly strained at the bars of the gate; it did not yield so much as a rattle.

"Nobody can find Agnew," was the report called from the stairs where the remnant of the mob denied entrance into the narrow space before the cell house had to cool its impatience. The man with the lantern held it high against

the bars; scores of eyes tried to peer through the concentric ranks of bars and find the man doomed to die. Impenetrable blackness there.

"To hell with the keys! Here, boys, let me through." It was Jim Hanscomb, the blacksmith, shouldering his way through the crowd. His black-headed sledge was carried over his shoulder. They made a ring for him around the gate to the cell block. The man with the lantern held it high to give light. Another man was directed by the big blacksmith where to hold his cold chisel against the lock.

The room roared with the impact of steel against steel. The mob bayed. Still from the pitchy blackness beyond the inner fence of steel not a sound.

For ten minutes the steel forest of the cell block was clangorous with the crash of sledge. Then the lock gave and the gate bounded open. A snarling cheer and the foremost of the mob pushed into the narrow corridor which ran four sides round the central block of cells.

"Hey, you Killer! We got you now!"

Slowly, inexorably, the lantern marched at the head of a shadowy rank of men, pausing at each door to be upheld, that its light might fall through bars.

Then a surprising thing — a thing of which Two Moons talks to this day:

Somewhere back in the barred jungle of gloom a match scratched. Men looking through bars saw a bit of lit candle wick catch the flame, saw the outlines of a hand as the candle fire waxed stronger. Slowly the moth-like flame was lifted until it revealed the body of a man. It stopped over his heart. Came a strong voice out of the darkness:

"Don't bust up any more of the county's property, boys. Here! Look!"

A rifle spoke. The candle flame was flicked out.

CHAPTER XVIII

Original Bill was not one of the wild horsemen who played a hundred-to-one chance against the mob before the jail. Though the instinct of the clan had pulled him that way and the old devil call of the range — which was only the adventure spirit of the boy magnified in the man — shouted that he join his fellows in the desperate sally, a saving sense of strategy kept him away from the mêlée. For one thing, the range inspector was perforce a resident of Two Moons; the town was his headquarters, and it would not be meet for him to be found among the raiders from the range. But overtopping that consideration was the heavier one of expediency.

The day's events carried to Original a broader significance than to the harum-scarum cow-punchers who had seized the golden opportunity for a run, in their pat phraseology. From that moment when he had looked down

out of his window upon the cavalcade escorting the Killer to jail the little scout of the range understood that now the two grappling forces, the barons of the horned cattle and the owners of the sheep, with their allies of the town, had come to a death lock. The blundering of Von Tromp had clinched upon the cattle clan the onus of murder suborned by gold, however clean might be the hands of the faithful retainers in the saddle, — the riders of the plains.

Zang Whistler had executed a master stroke by riding boldly into town; he had become a hero in the eyes of the town and definitely exalted himself as a leader against the cattlemen. The town mob unquestionably would release him from jail, if, indeed, Sheriff Agnew had made the gesture of putting him behind bars. The leader of the Teapot Spout gang of outlawed cow-punchers and brand burners would ride free to prey upon the cattle outfits at will.

Original, pacing before the deserted Capitol Saloon and provoked to a burning restlessness by the uproar a few blocks up the street, came to a stern resolution. He would clean out the Spout at once, perhaps catch Whistler before he could get back to his hole in the mountains,

at least fall upon him and his men in the first moment of their fancied security.

A big contract! Rumor credited Zang Whistler with having between thirty and forty men behind his back, all of them former cowpunchers who had been black-balled by the foremen of the Big Country for known or suspected dexterity with the running iron. Some had taken a flyer at holding up Union Pacific trains and had beaten pursuing posses in a race for the Spout. All were men who would fight desperately against any menace of prison bars. Once before Original had attempted to fight his way into the Spout at the head of a picked company of range riders and had been beaten back, but on that occasion he had gained a fair conception of the lay of the land which he had broadened subsequently by many unsuspected reconnoitering expeditions to high places and hours spent peering through his glass.

The range inspector swiftly conned over available material to put at his back. Of the men in town that night there were five or six whose fiber of bravery he had seen put to the test beforetime, and he knew its quality to be high. These men would form the nucleus of

his force. Between town and the Spout lay the Circle Y and the Hashknife ranges; from these two he firmly believed he could recruit his strength and provision his outfit for a swift and deadly invasion of that narrow hallway of the mountains which was Zang Whistler's citadel.

"And this won't be Mistér Von Tromp's notion of a kiss-in-the-corner game either," Original spoke his thoughts aloud. "Somethin's going to bust and bust big!"

He walked swiftly down Main Street away from the direction of the courthouse and turned into the dark maw of the Fashion Stables, where his little horse Tige had a stall. The dim and hay-sweet interior was deserted. A single lantern hanging on a peg at the entrance to the alleyway of stalls threw a fitful light over the rumps of the nearest tethered horses. Original took down the lantern, by its light selected his saddle from those pegged along one wall, and walked to the stall where his four-footed chum was bedded. An affectionate nicker from Tige sent greeting to him before ever Original turned the stall post to give his little horse a pat on the flank.

Had Tige been gifted with speech he would

have told his master something greatly in the latter's interest, which was that from the square hole in the hayloft directly over Tige's manger a pair of eyes were following the man's every movement, — eyes filled with a great fear and the desperation of some wild creature caught in a deadfall.

Hilma Ring, lurking like a hunted beast through the willows skirting the meandering course of the Poison Spider, had believed herself a fugitive, thinking the uproar about the jail behind her the beginnings of pursuit. The girl was in the last extremity of panic. Her accustomed phlegm, heritage of the Norse blood in her, had been dissipated by the whirlwind of events, and now that corroding imagination which rode the wings of the dark out around the little cabin on Teapot roweled her mercilessly.

Prison bars! The crossed branches of the willows sketched them before her eyes. The clank of iron shutting out the world; a loosened stone dropping to strike a bowlder dinned the dreadful sound in her ears. Oh, to get back to the silent places where the land heaves interminably away to the great dike of the mountains! To undo the folly of that ride with

Zang and the Killer into a trap laid by that smiling little enemy, Original Bill Blunt!

Roots tripped her and she scrambled whimpering to her feet. The sly enmity of the blackberry vines laid snares for her, pecked at her thrusting arms with vicious claws. Now the leisurely sweep of the stream had brought her very close to the town, where the bridge crosses on to Main Street. Almost above her head were the black silhouettes of buildings.

Hilma climbed the steep bank away from running water and dropped behind a packing box on a rubbish heap of discarded cans to listen for the footfalls of pursuit. None sounded. There was now no more sound of firing from the direction of the jail, now the whole span of the town's four blocks away from the fugitive. She ran, bending low, to throw herself beneath a wagon standing in an unused corral behind the blacksmith shop. From the wagon her next spurt took her to the refuse piles at the back of the Fashion Stables, the objective of her Indianlike dodging and twisting. A manure trap at the back of the stable was open; through it the girl climbed to drop to the floor at the end of the dim row of stalls.

She had come to steal a horse. Horses were here for her choice.

The hidden beasts in their stalls snorted suspiciously when Hilma dropped through to the interior of the stable. A fresh wave of panic drenched her; she dropped behind a pile of bagged oats and listened to the thump-thump of her heart. No inquiring footsteps up where that single lantern hung between the farthest stall and the saddle pegs. The stable seemed deserted of men.

It was long before the girl mustered her courage to the point where she could dare venture on skipping toes down the stall lane where hung the saddles. She lifted one off its peg, threw across her arm the saddle blanket resting beneath and started back to pick her horse. It required all her strength to hold the saddle high so that dragging stirrups would not betray her. She turned into one pitch-black stall at the rearmost end of the alley, whispered soothing words to the beast that resented her intrusion with a whiffling snort and prancing hoofs, then spread the blanket across its back. Just as Hilma was lifting the saddle into place the sound of footsteps at the entrance of the stable sent a stab through her heart.

She dropped the saddle. One hand flew out in the darkness and touched the rung of a rough wall ladder shooting up to the hayloft above. Hardly conscious of her movements, she clambered swiftly hand over hand up to the black vastness and let herself drop panting on the spicy hay.

For a while Hilma gave herself to a delicious lassitude, — weakness coming in the train of long nerve strain. Then, as one by one the hay vents into the stalls below glowed golden with the passing of a lantern beneath, curiosity battled with her fear. Through a square in the floor not many feet distant the light shone steadily, indicating that the lantern had come to a stop in the stall below. The girl inched her way with painful caution to the edge of the hole and dared look over.

She saw below her a broad-brimmed hat which almost hid the span of a man's shoulders beneath. Hands seemingly detached busied themselves with cinch and bridle. For a minute the hat laid itself against the horse's muzzle, and the sound of a love croon came up to her ears. The horse laid back his ears and playfully pretended to bite.

"You no 'count ole hayburner, just you

keep your hair on 'til I go write up my tally on Lonny Moore's slate. Then I 'm goin' ride you plumb thin. 'Til you ain't got a tick left in your clockworks; you hear me, fool hoss!"

Tige heard. So did Hilma Ring. She heard and recognized the voice of her enemy. Her blood went cold within her, then hot rage succeeded. Original's foot-falls diminished in the direction of the office up by the street door.

A wild impulse seized the girl. Without giving time for reason it pushed her over the edge of the hay drop. Little Tige snorted in outrage and backed to the length of his bridle rope when a blue dress flashed past his eyes and quick hands flew to unsnap the clasp on his bit ring. Hilma gave a great leap, managed to throw one leg over the saddle just as Tige backed out of the stall. She fought for her seat, and found it and gave the angry horse a cut with the bridle ends as she whirled him round for the door.

Her feet had not found the stirrups and her stockinged knees, with the taut hem of her skirt bound about them, were clamped tight against the saddle flaps when Tige bore her plunging for the street.

Original, hearing the clatter of hoofs, ran

out from the office, arms spread wide. Lamplight from the door behind him showed him just a flash of Tige's blazed forehead bearing down upon him, a shapely leg bound tight against the saddle girth, a white face and blazing eyes. He put up one hand to seize the bridle.

Hilma leaned forward in the saddle; the quirtlike loose ends of the bridle rein whirled from her hand like leaping vipers and smote him fair in the face. He saw the girl's white teeth bared in a grimace of hate. Then she was out and thundering down the street for the bridge and the Big Country beyond.

Original leaped for the saddle pegs and, a saddle on arm, dashed down to the nearest horse stall.

CHAPTER XIX

Over in the eastern sky above the dim Black Hills the velvety blackness that is night in the Big Country began insensibly to grow less like the nap on a black butterfly's wing and the stars that had been burning there, each suspended by invisible cords from the vault of heaven, retreated and became one with the flatness of the sky. The pallid east flushed its first harebell pink while all the remaining sweep of celestial lights glowed as if night were to be eternal. Bit by bit the blot of the Big Country became a blur; the blur took dim form. Hills rose from nothingness. Buttes were conjured out of the void. The long sleepy waves of the divides stirred under the first breath of dawn, their frozen tides restless to be freed.

Deeper flushed the pink in the east. Down in the line of alders that marked the course of a stream faint chitterings and flutterings betokened the waking of the wilderness things.

An owl's insistent who-o-o-o-whup which had been the pulse beat of the night was stilled so suddenly that the whole void between earth and dimming stars seemed to hang breathless for its repetition. A coyote with his early-morning kill between his paws sent quavering through the half light a meat call to a mate. Dawn came swiftly.

It found Original sitting a borrowed horse atop the highest butte in Bad Water Breaks, waiting for light. He was alone. He had ridden all night crisscrossing over the Big Country that lies between Two Moons and Teapot Creek, seeking Hilma Ring, whom he believed lost.

After the sudden savage apparition of the girl who rode him down in the Fashion Stables and cut him with the bridle rein Original had saddled the first horse to hand, left a brief note explaining his action on Lonny Moore's slate and started across the Poison Spider bridge in pursuit. The girl had, perhaps, ten minutes' start of him. Between the bridge and Twenty Mile Creek there was but a single road with no forking. Believing Hilma was making for her home, the man confidently expected to overhaul her before she reached the ford of

Twenty Mile. Though he knew nothing of the horse between his knees, he counted on the girl's failure to get out of a rebellious Tige one-half that little horse was capable of giving.

But he had not gone ten miles before he became convinced the girl was not ahead of him. Dismounting, he had examined with lighted matches the thin dust lying over the hard 'dobe of the road; no cut hoofmarks in the dew-drenched ribbon of dirt. Where had she turned off, and why?

Then he remembered one of Tige's little tricks. Whenever he rode Tige over this road to Teapot, if there were no pressing hurry, he allowed the little horse to take a cross trail leading a mile off the road to a salt lick. Never had he passed that cross trail without a pantomime of protest on Tige's part. It was one of their little games — a secret between friends, this ear-flattening and angry side-stepping mock heroics on Tige's part. Back to the cross trail rode Original. Once more the lighted match. Tige's trail lay plain as a painted arrow along the salt-lick path; the hoofprints showed he had swerved at full gallop and without his rider's knowledge, for there was no break made by a bridle tug.

At the salt lick little was revealed to the keen eye of the trailer. Tige had tried to stop. Once he had bucked in protest against the will of the rider which pushed him on, then he had compromised with his old racking gait. But he was following a dim, forgotten trail leaping cross country to Wild Horse Cañon in the wildest of the Powder River Country. The girl Hilma was lost in the Big Country.

So, after a night of slow traveling in the general direction of the trail Tige had taken — so faint it was that Original could only pick up familiar landmarks as they came out of the night's sack — he awaited the coming of the light on the highest pinnacle of Bad Water Breaks. He was on the highest ground for thirty miles around; Hilma could not move anywhere within that radius without eventually revealing herself to the trailer.

Strengthening light played upon the cathedral columns of the breaks all around — wind-and-water-hewn terrain all chopped and scarred into coulees and snaglike buttes. Light rolled back the night from all the waves of the divides between the breaks and Pumpkin Buttes far to the southward. Stronger became the contours until all the land lay like a

relief map in clay and putty under Original's feet.

Then he saw the girl. Just a slow moving dot of blue away off to the southeast where the Crazy Squaw feels its way toward Powder. He watched her for a while, watched her make a wide circle and come to a halt, circle again and stop in a swale between divides. That tiny dot of blue cried across crystal spaces "Lost — lost!"

A slow smile tugged at the corners of Original's mouth as he put his borrowed mount to the steep declivity of the butte and came jolting down into the tortuous alleys of the coulees. A little of pity in that smile; a little of sardonic humor. To him, who could traverse the most dangerous stretches of the Big Country in the dark and at full tilt, who knew this mountain-bound wilderness as a city dweller knows his flat, that wandering dot of blue was a bird in the net.

"Stranger hoss," he caroled, with the lilt of laughter in his voice, "you 're bound to meet up with a fightin' wild cat right soon. But she sure has lost some of her claws. She 'll have to pay some for holdin' up my game."

The wily trailer played his game so neatly

that the girl did not see him until he came swinging at a trot straight down from the crest of a little swell fairly upon her. At sight of him her eyes widened in terror, and she tried to put Tige into a run. The stubborn little brute took two or three stiff-legged plunges, then stopped and whinnied a welcome to his master as Original slipped swiftly alongside and brought the other horse to a halt with hand at the bit.

The man said nothing for a minute. He contented himself with looking with a quizzical pucker about his eyes into the girl's face. Overnight terror of wandering had left its stamp there, but the fighting spirit of her strove mightily to hang up the emblems of defiance in eyes and cheeks.

"Sorta takin' the morning air, I reckon," Original said with a broad smile. No answer.

"They 's not many wagon tracks hereabouts an' the country 's fair to middlin' safe for anybody who don't find herself wishful to meet up with strangers." Original seemed to be talking more to Tige than to the girl; there was an impersonal quality in his speech. "Yes, ma'am, this here 's called Cattle Kate's country — here round Crazy Squaw. You 've heard

tell of Cattle Kate?" He looked up with polite interest. The girl's lips tightened against an answer. Her eyes were alert against the unguessed objective of Original's attack.

"Well," he drawled in a voice that was musical in its odd cachinnations — "well, Cattle Kate was the only woman hung in the Big Country — up to date. She was hung for a hoss thief 'long with Old Man Averill."

Hilma started despite herself, then the angry flush deepened on her cheeks. She made an impatient gesture with her shoulders as if to challenge the man to do his worst, now that he had her prisoner.

"What have I to do with all this talk — Cattle Kate and Cattle Kate's country?" she defied. The man's face suddenly fell into serious lines, which a faint flickering of humor around the eyes almost belied.

"That 's my hoss you 're ridin', an' out in this country it 's always been a sort of custom that when somebody takes somebody else's hoss without saying so much as thank you there 's bound to be misunderstandings — sometimes misunderstandings right serious. Leastwise, that 's the law for men; we 've only had one woman hoss thief, like I was sayin'."

The girl sensed that this enemy of hers was playing with her — letting her run like an injured mouse, as it were, only to follow with the smiting paw. But up through her consuming rage at his cruelty pushed once more that great fear of the night before; the fear that had sent her blundering through the willows seeking to lose the shadow of a jail behind her. Now he spoke of horse stealing. To be sure, in her desperation of the night before she had determined to steal a horse in order to put town behind her, but she had not expected to be caught. That it was Original's horse she had stolen and Original himself who now had her helpless here in the wilderness of a sudden seemed terrible beyond endurance.

The instinct of woman, old as Eve, came to her rescue. When in a tight place take the offensive.

"I might have counted on seeing you out here. I might have known you could n't keep yourself from fighting a woman." Original was a fair mark for the barb. He flushed angrily, and the hint of humor about his eyes sped on the instant.

"That 's my little hoss Tige you 're ridin', let me remind you. I followed my property.

If you was a man I would n't be passin' conversation polite and proper. The owner of a hoss animal don't have much to say to the man who stole him when he meets up with that man; one or t'other mostly 's beyond talk. You 'll oblige me, ma'am, by gettin' down off my hoss."

Hilma, quick to press the advantage her feminine guile had established, tossed her head with a laugh.

" And if I don't get down? " she challenged. Instantly the girl regretted carrying the high hand so far. By a sudden pressure of the knees Original had ranged his horse alongside Tige, and his left arm whipped out to encircle her waist. She felt herself lifted from the saddle as if she were a child, and even as she twisted to bring her hands into play she was lowered across the man's saddle horn. She gave her shoulders a mighty heave to break the grip across her biceps, but, somehow, the struggle only seemed to tighten the steel band that held them close to her body.

The girl's body was bent slowly back until her eyes were forced to meet the black eyes above them. These were dancing now. The lips of the man were parted in a radiant smile. His whole face beamed impish mischief.

"The most reg'lar treatment for hoss thieves," said he, "is to drive 'em under a cottonwood tree, an' when somebody gives the bronc a cut he runs away, leavin' Mister Hoss Thief right there under the cottonwood tree. But the law hereabouts don't say they 's no special treatment for special cases." The smiling lips were slowly descending toward hers. Fun devils danced in those black eyes.

"Which it 's my privilege an' my duty right here an' now to do."

He kissed her full on the lips. He laughed and kissed her again. Then, just as he released the hold on her straining arms, he leaped lightly out of the saddle and was sitting on Tige's back before Hilma could fully recover herself.

The girl swayed slightly. Her face was drained white. Her startled eyes stared straight ahead. "Oh!" she whispered, and again, "Oh!"

"Now we 'll be amblin' along," came Original's matter-of-fact command. Tige broke into a trot and the livery horse dumbly followed. Hilma set her feet in the stirrups and pulled her skirts down to cover her stockings. Automatic were her movements. Her mind

was not a part of her. It was racing like a wild locomotive.

Horror, blind passion, fear, shame, — like a revolving color chart these emotions flickered across her consciousness, each leaving its trace of an impression to mingle with the next and produce a blur of sensation. Then slowly emerged a thought which would not down, try as she would furiously to suppress it.

"The first man," so ran that thought — "the first man to ——" At first the thought did not finish itself, but kept reiterating itself through her brain courses like a hammer's din. Then in a flash the thing popped out completed:

"The first man to break me down!"

Tears stood in the girl's eyes, — tears of anger, yes, and of self-revelation. Had she a rifle in her hands she would have leveled it at those smoothly rippling shoulders a few paces before her and without compunction sent a bullet between them. Yet ——

All at once a vivid picture of that minute when she was in his arms flashed on the retina of her soul. She saw again the laughing eyes, — clean eyes with naught but mischief in them; she saw the impish mockery of the lips that

leant toward hers, lips with a will power behind them. "Which it 's my privilege an' my duty right here an' now to do."

At once the girl was furiously angry with herself for permitting this softening picture to come to her. Her heart steeled itself against the insidious voice of any counsel for the defense. And so over an endless treadmill wearily Hilma Ring's soul climbed and climbed while miles unreeled themselves behind her and all the Big Country round about lay glorious in the morning.

Not once did the man before her look back.

Finally they descended a long gentle slope to a road that wound about its base — the first road they had seen since they left Cattle Kate's country. Reaching it, Original brought Tige to a halt and turned.

"Your way lies over yonder." He gave a sweep of his arm along the road to the south. "You can't miss the road in daylight. I 'll tell Lonny Moore about the horse you 're ridin', an' he can send for it."

He gravely lifted his hat, turned and cantered to the north, leaving the girl staring.

CHAPTER XX

When, baffled by bars, the mob in the Two Moons jail had sent a shot at a flickering candle flame and the life of him known as the Killer had gone out with a chauvinistic grace strangely at variance with the record that had won his grim sobriquet, the cry went up: "Where's Zang Whistler? Turn loose Zang Whistler." Every remaining cell in the block was searched from without; all were empty. Then the mob broke into segments, scouring the courthouse and the living quarters contiguous to the jail for Sheriff Agnew and the prisoner believed by him to have been smuggled to a secret hiding place.

Whistler, true to his pledged word, had remained in the darkened room, waiting at the window for the turn of events. There a dozen of the townsmen found him and acclaimed him with cheers.

"Make yourself scarce, Zang," was the

cheerful admonition boomed at him by Hanscomb, the blacksmith. "We 're the whole court and jury, an' we find you not guilty. We just found the Killer guilty, the vote being unanimous."

The outlaw, blinking at the light one of the men carried, hesitated and seemed to show no interest in the freedom offered him.

"Say, what 's the matter with you? Don't you want to be turned loose?"

"Thanks, boys, I do," he answered hesitantly. "But there 's a girl I 'm sorta looking after. She was round here somewhere when Agnew locked me up and ——"

"Oh, he means that yaller-haired beauty that come riding in with him and Uncle Alf ridin' herd on the Killer," piped an inspired one. "You 're all right, you are, Zang. You 're a picker! C'm on, we 'll find her for you."

Another group of the mob, meanwhile, had found Sheriff Red Agnew stretched unconscious in a bedroom by the side of an opened window. They had the big man sitting up and gagging over fiery liquor poured in generous quantity down his throat when Whistler and his convoy arrived. Agnew sent a dazed look at Whistler.

"You see, sheriff, somebody 's took the law outa your hands, an' they say I 'm free," the outlaw explained a little sheepishly. "Of course, if you 're wishful to run counter ——"

"Why, you poor orphan idjit," the blacksmith caught him up. "Do I hear you pleadin' with Red Agnew here to lock you up again? Vamose while the court 's feelin' its oats and is kind to you."

"Just let me have a word alone with Agnew here, boys," Zang pleaded, "then I 'll do whatever you want." The crowd, complaisant in its triumph of the night, backed out of the room, leaving the two alone. Zang helped Agnew to his feet and sat him on the edge of the bed.

"Where 's the girl, Red?" he questioned tensely.

"Gone, Zang. Kidnapped, I 'm afraid, by the cow-punchers." Zang started and his hand fell on the other's shoulder.

"Pull yourself together, Red," he urged. "Do a little thinking before you talk wild. What do you mean, kidnapped?"

"Mean what I say. After I 'd brought you down from the cell house I come in here to get the girl, like I promised you. She 's not here.

But just the minute I see this, in through the window there comes Timberline Todd and a lot of others, and they tackle me and put me out. What 's the answer? They 'd grabbed her just before I come in and were planning to rush the jail through this way while a bunch of their outfit was keeping the town crowd busy on the street out front."

The leader of Teapot Spout strove desperately to get a grip on himself. The other's deductions seemed unassailable; he could conceive no reason why Hilma should have fled the protection of the sheriff's quarters, particularly with the uproar and shooting on the street; there was none in Two Moons, he believed, to whom she could have gone. But — kidnapping by the cow-punchers — why — why? Suddenly a thought drove home:

"Red, you did n't see this here Original Bill pile in through the window along with the rest?"

"No, Zang. That long old pine marten Timberline Todd 's only one I recognized, and when I land a warrant on to him, he 's going to look through bars a mighty long time. What makes you mix up Blunt in this thing? He always plays 'em from the top of the pack pretty

regular and square, even if he does make his salt off the cattle outfits."

Zang did not answer. His mind was racing in an effort to find support for the swift suspicion lodged there. This Original Bill was a man of infinite resource. Zang remembered that from the old days of their association together with the trail herds. The tribute was emphasized by recollection, too, of the man's many stratagems in their more recent private warfare. He dismissed as untenable the premise that the range inspector had been prompted to spirit away the girl to satisfy any private grudge arising out of the fight in Hilma's cabin; Original was not one to hound a woman. But — and here suspicion nearly gave way to conviction — Blunt had seen enough to guess the hold Hilma had upon Zang Whistler; forestalling the release of Zang Whistler by the mob, would not his shrewdness have prompted him to gain possession of the girl in order that he might lead her questing lover into a trap?

"Well, Red, reckon I 'll go get my little hoss an' get busy. I just got to find Hilma." Zang put out a hand to meet the sheriff's.

"Good luck to you, Zang," the unconven-

tional right arm of the law encouraged. "But don't linger too long round town. When things quiet down, if I should find you in Two Moons, why I 'd have to take you up again, Zang. Duty is duty, you know."

The outlaw went out to the shed stable behind the jail to saddle his horse. He found there, hanging on the peg above Hilma's saddle, a blue gingham apron done into a bundle, — the girl's pitiful collection of treasures gathered that day, now seeming ages past, when she had closed her cabin on Teapot and started to ride with him to the Spout. Reverently Zang lifted the bundle to his own saddle horn, then he turned his horse out of the jail yard and down Main Street, still boiling in the afterthroes of the night's passion.

Whipped by a cold and deadly resolve, the big outlaw's eyes under their shadowing hat brim were those of a stalking tiger. They leaped from face to face in the fluxes and eddies of men the pools of light across the road illumined. Though his injured right hand was stiff in splints and bandages, all the power and the cunning of him lay tingling in his ready left. A more dangerous man never ranged Two Moons' single street.

Zang Whistler was looking for Original Bill Blunt. Haply found, the issues of life and death between them would hang on the balance of a hair. But at that hour the object of the outlaw's search was riding alone the salt-lick trail away out under the stars where somewhere in the bad lands beyond Crazy Squaw Hilma Ring blundered in the mazes of the night and the illimitable labyrinth of the Big Country.

The sardonic genius of the Big Country had wrought but part of her will in Two Moons that night. There in a whirlpool of her own devising had been sucked all the bitter hates and tiger ferocities she had been brewing out on the clean spaces of the wide range. There she had contrived a blood reckoning on the tally of little pebbles found on dead men's foreheads; a Killer had received in full the harvest of his sowing. A desperate rallying of the range clan had hurled itself in a wave against the wall of its enemies and fallen back broken; even now hurrying groups of horsemen coursed the divides to find refuge from the wrath that seethed under the town's yellow lights. Unstable law, newly come to the Big Country, had been harried and scorned and made a mockery. Anarchy of the wolf pack was abroad.

Yes, and the little human puppets under the finger of this mocking genius were chips wildly eddying in the whirlpool of her caprice. A Von Tromp, sore in body, bitter in spirit, sat like a coiled rattler in a swaying stage carrying him south to the railroad and that mysterious ring of the big people who employed him; he was hurrying to report nothing less than a scourge of fire competent to prevent the extinction of the cattle clan. A Hilma Ring, become horse thief, was lost in the Big Country, and two men sought her, — one a lover. A wilderness preacher and prophet called upon his Maker to witness that he, and he alone, had wrought the vengeance of the Most High.

But the tale was not told; the comedy had yet another act. Having achieved confusion in the Big Country, the capricious spirit went elsewhere for her instruments of dénouement.

Far, far to the south where the deserts lap like seas about raw towns and all the outlaw trails converge before leaping the Line to Mexico, certain agents whose names need not appear in this chronicle — go to the Big Country to-day and these names will be told you in whispers — certain agents, I say, were busy at their peculiar devices. In the back rooms of

saloons in this and that town known throughout the Southwest as bad, these agents talked with men of hard features and harder lives.

They talked glibly, did these agents, of easy money. They said they were recruiting a force of regulators who were to clean up cattle thieves. So many dollars down, all expenses paid, grub and horse for every man; and in the end, when everything was tidied up, a fat bonus for every man employed.

Whispers passed through the walls of these saloon back rooms in tough desert towns. The whispers were of something called the Invasion.

CHAPTER XXI

A WEEK had passed since the night of madness in Two Moons. Hilma Ring — marveling at the freedom she had received from the hands of Original Bill, understanding this action not at all nor the man who had punished her with a kiss, then piloted her out of Cattle Kate's country and set her on her own road — Hilma lived on the diminishing store of flour and bacon in her own cabin. She lived adventitiously from hour to hour, without a plan. The soul of the girl drifted without anchorage. Time on time a sense of responsibility to a pledged word urged her return to Two Moons where — having heard no word to the contrary — she believed Zang Whistler to be still in jail. But at every such prompting, the laughing eyes and smiling white teeth of the man called Original Bill arose across the road to town, blocking it for her with a host of fears. Yes, and with something else, — some curious, undefin-

able menace of mastery for which the girl's mind could not find a word vehicle.

She wished never to meet this man again. She prayed earnestly she might meet him once, she with a rifle in her hands. So the pendulum of her impulses swung, coming never to a rest. She was alternately frightened and furiously angry when she discovered that whenever she thought of Zang Whistler, the wind-roughened features of the outlaw immediately faded and melted into the round, smiling face of this enemy. She could see again just the look of dancing mischief that had filled those eyes; she could feel the touch of his lips ——

Zang Whistler, after a night's prowling through Two Moons without encountering the man he sought, found no recourse but to return to Teapot Spout. His further presence in the town might embarrass the sheriff. To ride haphazard out to the cattle ranges on a hit-or-miss search for Hilma and Original would be but to court sudden death at the hands of any chance rider. His useless right hand was a handicap not to be overlooked. Before he left town he spread word of Hilma's disappearance among a few, — Uncle Alf, Woolly Annie and half a dozen friends besides them. Their

promise to let him know when the girl turned up or whatever might be news of her was little enough comfort to carry him out to his retreat in the foothills of the Broken Horns.

The man was wholly under the spell of the girl's magic beauty. In a vague way he thought because he knew her beauty he knew her soul. Well enough Whistler appreciated that this latter was not yet his to command. But a dogged belief that, given opportunity, he could establish dominion over that soul buoyed him up through all the agony of doubt the thought of Hilma's enforced meeting with Original Bill entailed.

The third figure in this cut-out puzzle of jumbled destinies, Original Bill, was moving upon a serious business these days following the mob sway in town. Not once did he return to town during the perfecting of his plans, for well he knew that spies there always awaited eagerly opportunity to pass the Spout news of his comings and goings. Instead he was careful to do what riding was necessary only by night lest even the most casual wayfarer on the road might by a careless remark in town spoil his carefully upbuilding plans.

So under the stars he rode from home ranch

to home ranch of the cattle outfits, recruiting his force for the assault upon the Spout. Here a man and there another, all known to him for their courage from beforetime. Hard riders, dead shots, die-hards; these were the men he culled from among the clan's best. Wherever he went his word to foremen and cow-punchers alike was: "It 's a clean-up now or we all go under."

Grave foremen, knowing the trend of the country's recent events against them and, particularly, the disastrous results of the hot-heads' foray against the mob in town, permitted Original his pick of their men; if he cared to stand sponsor for this extra-legal expedient in the face of the law's failure to give protection against the Spout gang, they professed themselves with him to the finish.

So it came about that near midnight one night when the Two Moons' events lay seven days back, a cavalcade of phantoms moved under the stars south from the Circle Y home ranch, place of rendezvous, in the direction of Sioux Pass and Teapot Spout beyond. No road was followed, for Original shunned roads when he was playing his game; smash through the untracked expanse of the divides the way

stretched; here a ford to be negotiated; there an almost perpendicular coulee bank up which the two outfit wagons had to be dragged with block and tackle. Though the darkness was pitchy, Original led the way unerringly as a man in his own house.

No makeshift force was his. Twenty-seven horsemen rode with him, and the wranglers among them had charge of two remounts to a man, — a *remuda* of the swiftest and sturdiest beasts the Big Country possessed. Two heavy outfit wagons carried grub, extra saddles, bedding and auxiliary stores of cartridges for rifle and six-shooter. Not since Job Brazil, famous trail driver of the seventies, had to shoot his way through a buffalo herd to cut a path for the longhorns had the Big Country seen a force such as this bent on extermination of the rustlers.

Dawn was just beginning to smear the east when Original headed the party into Bear Hole, five miles away from the northern reaches of the Spout. A great gash in the bastions of the mountains, this Bear Hole, with perpendicular cliffs grudgingly giving space for Muddy Creek to break through to the plains beyond, mouth of the gorge screened by

scrub pines and a thick mantle of pines draped over the tiny flats along both sides of the stream. Here bears — or men — could hide while searchers passed within a few yards of them.

In the deep gloom of the Hole camp was struck, breakfast cooked and the men of the expedition lay down to sleep through the day for the coming night's work. Original alone rode out with the spreading dawn to pursue secret alleys through the mountains known to him only. These devious goat tracks led to heights above the narrow gorge called Teapot Spout; from these heights, as from a seat in a theater gallery, the range rider could survey the stage below, where a drama of swift action was to be played.

From a high ledge of rim rock running like a comb over the summit of a beetling cliff behind the Spout Original made his final reconnoissance. With Tige bridle-tied to a little clump of spruce behind the ledge and he himself flat on his stomach, glass in hand, the general of the little field force concealed in Bear Hole spent hours conning the land below him.

Teapot Spout well deserves its name. It is, in truth, a spout for the bowl of the mountains

behind it which carries the creek from headwaters in the Broken Horns out to the rolling country through a twisted bore gashed out of the living rock by glacial chisels. Almost due north to south stretches the gorge, twenty-seven miles in extent. In its northernmost reaches it narrows to a chasm less than three hundred yards from lip to lip of the almost perpendicular bounding cliffs, and with the creek foaming down from the cascades marking its drop over the lava dike that heads the cañon. Beyond this chasm the valley grudgingly widens into green meadows through which the stream loafs in meandering course, but the bounding walls continue rugged almost beyond the power of man or beast to scale until at the southern gate they are drawn aside in a wide pass. Heavy timber throws a screen along the lower reaches of Teapot Spout.

Even to-day, when peaceful ranches dot the floor of the Spout and the shuf-shuf of Tin Lizzies sounds where once the yip-yip of Zang Whistler's men rounded stolen cattle into a trail herd for surreptitious markets in another State, there are but two ways into the mountains' treasure box: The road that comes from the east over a high shoulder of one bounding

wall up to the old Bar C Ranch and another passing up from the south where the Tisdale ranch stands and into the valley through the natural gate at the southernmost end. The Bar C Ranch is placed just where the northern gorge broadens into the gentler expanses of meadowland, and thence the road carries along the course of the stream threading the valley.

When the Spout first was made the stronghold of brand burners and train robbers in exile, Bar C Ranch became a nucleus for the outlaw settlement, and at the Spout's gate the lawless inhabitants posted their defi: "No cattle cutting in this valley. Keep out!" From his aerie Original could see the cluster of ranch buildings away down in the vivid green plush of the valley floor: Four log houses and a corral, all foreshortened into the dimensions of children's toys. Thickly scattered moving dots against the green on both sides of the ribbon of water he knew to be cattle, — stolen cattle carrying on their flanks the brands of a dozen different rightful owners. He estimated at rough guess a full thousand of them and judged there would be more concealed by the screen of pines farther down the valley. Now and again the watcher on the heights

caught a glimpse of a horseman straddling like a beetle down the ribbon of road.

The taint of unreality hung over the whole scene. To the watcher on the rim rock this colorful bit of landscape, all green and silver streaked where white water spliced the meadows, and set in the deep box of the mountain's granite, was a painting in a shadow box. The rich vein of poetry that ran deep below the surface of Original's nature thrilled to the scene. But the practical problems of the grim business going forward did not permit themselves to be long obscured. When he had completed in every detail his survey of the valley Original turned his glass to the perpendicular wall opposite where he lay and slowly covered every inch of its surface.

There lay a secret of his own discovering and which he had shared with no man. He called it the Ladder. It was a way down into the Spout unguessed by the Spout's unlovely inhabitants. Once before he had used it; now the Ladder played a big part in the strategy of the attack.

As the man's field glass slowly crept across the face of the gray rock, tufted here and there by a stunted pine, the eye behind it was strain-

ing to pick up remembered guideposts. Finally the glass came to a halt. Into its circular field had suddenly appeared that which the watcher sought.

A tortuous crack in the solid wall of the gorge it was. Here a sheer apron of granite gave it a pitch downward at a church-spire angle; there the fly track was broken by a series of ledges where bushes found precarious lodgment; the whole descent appeared little less vertical than a parachute drop. But Original knew from his past essay that one with a cool hand and a sturdy mount under him could negotiate that Ladder, — at a risk. It was an old game trail, and a mountain-bred horse will go anywhere a blacktail may lead. The foot of the Ladder found rest in a concealing pine wood not more than two miles from the group of ranch houses.

Near noon Original returned to the hidden camp in Bear Hole and rolled himself in his blankets to sleep until sundown. When he awoke his men had stowed all in the outfit wagons and saddled their horses in readiness for the hike. Original called them about him and explained the plan of attack.

"Timberline Todd and Hank Rogers, you

two come with me for a little *pasear* down into the Spout to-night. Andy Dorson, I want you to take charge of the rest. Make a wide swing round the outside of the valley after dark as far as Tisdale's ranch. Don't show yourselves anywhere close to the ranch, but hide out in a bunch of cottonwoods you 'll find 'long the creek bottom between Tisdale's and the way into the Spout. Soon 's you see the first streak of mornin' saddle up fresh broncs, leavin' two of the boys to keep the string of horses there in the cottonwoods — which we 'll sure need fresh animals when we come larrupin' out of the Spout.

"You boys make into the Spout past Tisdale's so 's to get up to the old Bar C Ranch sometime before sunup. You 'll likely not see anybody below Bar C that 's ready to give you a run, but if you do just tear into 'em an' come a'runnin', because I 'm figuring on landing on to the bunch when they 're having their hog an' hominy. You 'll find Timberline an' Hank here an' me hiding out somewhere on the road to Bar C with a friend or two" — here Original grinned — "that is, if we play in luck to-night. I 'm aimin' to cut Zang Whistler an' maybe one or two of his little playmates out of

the herd to-night before the concert begins to-morrow.

"An' remember, boys, we 're not collecting scalps. Don't shoot to kill until you have to. But when it comes to the real skilletin' there 's no call for anybody to be a perfec' lady. Now, Timberline an' Hank, we 'll just mosey along; we got a pretty piece of ridin' to do before it gets dark."

The others gave the three a silent cheer as they rode single file down the aisle of pine trunks to the gateway of Bear Hole and the adventure that lay beyond.

The sun was just down when the three came to the summit of the Spout's eastern wall, where the topmost granite rung of Original's ladder lay. Below them the Spout already was purple with shadows; they floated like filmy weed on the surface of some unruffled pool. Beyond and behind, the high cone of Cloud's Rest was a beacon of cherry red, and the lower country whence they had come showed faint gold for unbroken miles.

"Boys," said Original, "we 're headed for a bit of trick ridin' like you read about in the fairy books. Give your li'l' kiote baits their own bit an' just swing with 'em wherever they

go. We 're like to hit bottom all in a bunch if anybody gets rollicky an' starts tellin' his beast where to head in."

So saying, Original disappeared over the sheer rim of the precipice as if he had ridden off on to the impalpable scum of shadow floating in the void.

Little Tige, all four feet bunched like a mountain goat's, took the slide down a fifteen-foot granite apron smooth as a watch crystal and came up on a lateral ledge fringing fearsome space. Then he turned to the left and ambled carelessly along a precarious footway to the next swift drop. He even paused to stretch his neck and browse the top off a scrubby bush that clung to nothingness below his hoofs as if to show the following and reluctant horses what a devil of a beast he was when it came to playing tag on church steeples. Nickering their fears, the other two patterned their tactics after Tige's.

Now sliding on their haunches so that their tails dragged behind them, now mincingly picking their steps along a shelf no wider than the breadth of a bandanna, twisting at right-angled turns for a leap across the riven bed of a winter's torrent, fetching up against the prickly

spines of a stunted spruce which swayed over space with the impact of their bodies — that ride of the three down the Ladder to Teapot Spout is tradition in the Big Country even to this degenerate day of the rough-riding flivver. The dark had engulfed them before the screening pines on the valley floor marked the end of the descent, and the last hundred yards through a bowlder-strewn chute were made with even the eyes of Chance blindfolded.

"Whew!" Timberline Todd softly breathed as he took off his hat and wiped the sweat of fear from the band. "Answer me true, my son; are you aimin' to go *up* this greased skid to hell when we finish out this little job of work down here. If so be, just tell the boys back at the Hashknife they can raffle off my gold watch for a keepsake."

"Why, you lily-livered ole backslider," Original reproved with silent laughter. "That 's charlotte rooshing with egg frills on to it compared to what 's ahead of us."

In the dark security of the pines they unsaddled to give their beasts a rest after the muscle-cracking strain of the Ladder's descent. Original, moreover, wished to give Zang Whistler and his gang ample time to settle

down for the night before attempting his foray on Bar C Ranch.

It was after nine o'clock by Original's watch when the horses were saddled and the start was made over the deadening carpet of pine needles for the road and the nest of outlaws down the valley. A thin sliver of a moon that hung low over the western rim of the Spout gave the only light. The narrow confines of this gut in the mountains were ghostly with faint stirrings and whisperings from the willow fringe along the stream, from the occasional spruce standing in stiff dignity a watch over the valley's sleeping creatures, clean and unclean equally. As they rode, Original mapped his plan of campaign:

"Boys, I 'm aimin' to cut Zang Whistler outa the herd an' run him down the valley to where we 'll meet up with the rest of our outfit in the morning. Besides the little private grudge between me an' Zang, which 's neither here nor there, I figger with him away the rest of his gang won't be so spunky when the big mill starts at sunrise. He 's always been the brains of this outfit of wolves; him gone, you 'll see the rest just chasin' their own tails when our music starts. What 's more, we three can get a good lay of the ground to-night so 's to make

our plans accordin' when the main outfit joins us."

"Where you reckon to find our li'l' Zang friend?" Rogers queried. "Do you know which 's his boodwar, as the fambly-fireside paper calls it?"

"Zang 's never asked me to drink a demmy-tass of chocolate with him in his boo-do-war," Original returned. "Which it 's been mighty unsocial of him an' wounding to the spirit. I reckon we 'll just project round until we find where Zang's bedroom an' bawth happen to be. I don't aim to send in my card by the butler, neither."

A bend in the road showed them, ahead, a dark huddle of buildings, four in all, and the spidery bars of a corral beyond. Three of the low sod-roofed houses stood together in a group; the fourth was a little way apart. From the windows of two of them yellow squares of light cut so many lozenges through the black cloak of the dark.

"That far one would be where Lonny Taylor holes out, him being married," Original ventured a guess. "Zang, I take it, has a house to himself, an' the other two are bunk houses for the gang. Only way we can spot

Zang is to ride in an' have a look-see all round. But remember, boys, don't pull a trigger unless it 's a matter of keeping a puncture outa your hide; a butt makes no noise and 's mighty handy for close work."

They rode under a group of alders a hundred yards or so away from the nearest of the houses and tethered their horses. Then, each with his .45 snuggled in the palm of the right hand, they approached the nearest lighted house, half crawling, Indian fashion, with the knuckles of the left hand touching ground. A short run across a patch of ground lighted by two windows brought the three standing back against the logs of the house, around the corner from the door.

That instant the scream of a pony sounded from the alder thicket where they had tethered their beasts.

"Damn that watch-eyed cayuse of mine!" Timberline breathed. "Always plays the goat with his teeth when a stranger hoss is round."

They heard the door open; they could feel, even though they did not see, the presence of a man in the doorway straining to peer through the dark.

"Don't see nothin', Zang," came the voice.

"Must be that new hoss we lifted off'n the Owens ranch gettin' 'nitiated down to the corral. Some fool hoss just put the outlaw brand on to him with his teeth."

The door closed. The three against the wall nudged one another. At least something had come of the minute of peril: Zang Whistler was located.

A tense hour passed in waiting; waiting until Whistler or his companions should leave the house. For the number of them was not known, and it was not part of Original's strategy to make a sally in force which would result in shooting and the rousing of a hornets' nest about his ears. Finally through a crack in the clay chinking by their ears came the noise of a table pushed back, then heavy footfalls on the floor. The door opened.

"Next time you hold up a kicker to your treys an' catch an ace-full, Zang, you just sell me for a sucker!" a voice called back into the cabin. Original recognized as Zang's the voice of the outlaw in answer from the interior. He dared peek around the corner of the house. Five men were stalking away in the direction of the other lighted building. The door was closed, and the sound of a bar dropped in place

behind it sent Original's heart down to his boot heels.

Again weary waiting until the quarry should fall into slumber. The lights went out in the cabin across the way. Silence of sea bottom settled down upon the outlaw nest. The whole star-stippled vault of the night seemed to bend low to catch the first crack of crude action impending there in that ghostly rock grave of the mountains.

Then at the end of an eternity came to the ears of the waiting three sounds of snoring through the logs. In two different keys! There were two sleepers in there!

The faces of the three were turned one toward another. Though none could see another's face, each felt the surprise registered there. Here was the unexpected; here a complication not anticipated.

Original drew out his knife and bared the spring blade. He moved under the first window to the front of the house and gently insinuated the knife blade under the sash. Pressure on the handle failed to budge the window; it was bolted from within. He tried two others with similar result. The door he knew without trying to be barred inside.

He was on the point of despairing when Timberline touched him on the arm and pointed to another window, hitherto overlooked. It was up under the peak of the roof, evidently looking out from a loft within. The distance from ground to sill was not more than ten feet. Original measured the distance with a calculating eye, then beckoned his companions to stand beneath the window with arms locked over each other's shoulders.

"I 'll go it alone," he breathed. "If you hear any trouble inside don't try to take on the crowd that will swarm down. Cut for the horses an' make it down toward Tisdale's to meet up with the rest of our outfit. I can stand off this bunch 'til they come."

With this parting injunction the lithe little man swarmed up the bodies of his friends until he stood on their shoulders. Once more the knife blade under a sash. This time the sash rose easily. Original slowly pushed it high, gave a light spring from supporting shoulders and disappeared through the black square in the log wall. The duet of snores remained unbroken.

The instant Original's carefully lowered toes struck flooring beneath the window the whole

body of him composed itself into a velvet calm of ordered nerves and muscles prime to leap to the reflexes of thought. Always it was this way with the range inspector when he stood on the threshold of action where the gauge of his life was laid in the scales; a clarity like dawn light swept over his mind, and every spring in his body was at the instant call of necessity. Exaltation would be the word to comprehend all.

He remained by the single window of the loft until his eyes had accustomed themselves to the deeper gloom under the roof. Slowly suggestions of shapes and bulks came to his brain, — the sharp angle of the roof meeting at a ridgepole, here and there a box. He stooped and his sentient fingers spread before him to feel a way. One step — another. He placed each foot as a stalking cat might. Now a quick look over one shoulder showed the dim square of the window miles away, yet he had moved but two paces.

One groping hand encountered an upright pole. The other hand instantly shot out to find the hoped-for mate of that pole. It was found. Here was the ladder dropping to the room below where the sleepers were. Now, steadying

himself against the ladder head, Original removed first one boot, then the other. He looped them over his shoulders with his bandanna tied between their straps, and his stockinged feet groped for the first rung of the ladder. Minutes were consumed by his painstaking descent; each rung was first tested for squeaks with a light pressure of the foot before his whole weight was placed upon it.

He stood, at last, on the floor. The gloom was a little less dense than that above, for three pallid squares against the walls marked windows giving starlight. One source of stertorous uproar in the dark seemed almost within touch of his left hand; the other was somewhere across the room. Guessing at the position of the door between two windows, Original cautiously groped a way thither and was rewarded by finding a heavy beam under his hand. He hesitated to draw it back. Luck had played with him generously so far, but dare he presume once more on fickle favor for the sake of insuring a safe retreat in case of difficulties?

With his shoulder against the door to ease any friction, the little fighter inched back the beam. It seemed to him he had moved full forty feet of the thing before a faint creak from

the door warned that it was free to swing inward. More Original dared not attempt; with the door on the jar he could get out on necessity.

Still the chorus of the sleepers carried its leitmotif thunderously.

When he had crawled in the upper window and painfully descended the ladder Original was still lacking any definite plan for the capture of the sleepers. That there should be two instead of the one he wanted was an embarrassment unlooked for. Had he only to reckon with Whistler he would have gone to the man's bunk, thrown himself on the sleeper and throttled him before he could make an outcry. But with two men, on opposite sides of the room this course would invite disaster. The sound of a struggle would bring the second man on his back. True, he might have risked opening the door and summoning his two aides in to help him, but a stiff pride denied this; Original desired to play a lone hand and bring out his man without assistance.

He bethought himself of the card game that had been in progress before Zang's companions departed. That would mean a lamp on the table. With infinite caution he groped until

his thigh touched a table edge; swiftly flitting hands searched for and found a lamp, softly lifted the shade from its socket.

Then a match. He struck it with his left hand, fingers curled around to hide the tiny blue flame. His gun was ready in his right. The little stick was an unconscionable time catching the flame. When it did Original touched fire to the lamp's wick. With a single swift move he had set the burning lamp, minus its chimney, on the floor before the table and leaped back into the shadow where the smoky tongue of flame could not search him out.

By the light he saw a blond head he recognized as Whistler's stir in a bunk not five feet away. With a broad sweep of his left arm he sent the lamp chimney crashing on the floor beneath Whistler's bunk.

"Wake up — you!" Original called in a voice that could carry to his aides outside.

CHAPTER XXII

THE crash of the shattered lamp chimney brought Whistler broad awake, and the instinctive prick of danger sent him sprawling out of his bunk before ever his eyes could comprehend its nature. His stockinged feet plumped down upon the broken glass, even as Original had designed, and with an oath the big outlaw leaped clear.

"Hist 'em, Zang," came the cold voice out of the streaked shadows beyond the table. "An' not a peep from you or you 're a dead man."

Up went Whistler's hands. His face in the smoky light was a study in abysmal surprise. His mouth, opened to vent a yell, remained a swallow hole in the frozen stump of his countenance when the round eye of Original's .45 commanded silence.

A noise of scrabbling feet from the other side of the room. Without so much as turning his

eyes thither, Original threw a warning over his shoulder:

"You, back there, cast your eyes to that window over by the door an' stay put in your bunk. This place isn't going to be healthy for to move round in."

A big hulk of a man, bearded like a chimpanzee, halted halfway out of his bunk and did as the strange voice bade. A face wearing a happy grin was pressed against the glass of the window; also the muzzle of a gun wickedly looking squarely at him. The face and the gun were Timberline Todd's. Now the door was suddenly pushed open and Hank Rogers entered.

"I call this pretty work, Original — pretty!" he caroled exultantly. "What li'l' thing do you want me to do?"

"There 's a reata over on that peg behind you," Original commanded. "Give that big woolly a tie." Then as he walked slowly over toward Zang. "I asks your pardon, Zang, for bustin' in this way on your beauty sleep. It ain't reg'lar nohow, but since you never did invite me to come an' see you an' I 've been mighty wishful for to make your closer acquaintance, I just natch'ly had to pick my

own time. You can put 'em down now, Zang, so 's I can try out a little fit about your wrists."

The pair of steel wristlets that once before had linked the outlaw's hands that day of the fight in Hilma's cabin now glinted in Original's left hand. With his right he still kept Zang covered. The man's features now had clotted into deadly hate. He seemed almost on the point of throwing caution to the winds and leaping upon the little range inspector, who stood smiling and with the waiting handcuffs.

"I oughta 've let her kill you, Blunt, that last time we met up," the outlaw snarled. "She fought me because I took the gun from her when she was just about to put you out. I 'm dead sorry I did."

Original clicked the cuffs about Zang's wrists as he answered lightly:

"She 's a nice girl, Zang — leastways, I 've found her so. But rough — rough as a porcupine's back. I 'm beholden to you, Zang, for teachin' her good manners. Now you 'll excuse me, Zang, but I 'm not copperin' any bets right here and so —— " He finished by deftly gagging the man with a handkerchief and a small square of wood he fished from a pocket.

Over the binding folds of the bandanna Whistler's eyes blazed like a cornered wolf's.

Hank Rogers had finished his job of binding the other outlaw's arms to his side with a handy loop left round the throat to be tightened for purposes of persuasion. Him Original also gagged. When both prisoners were at the door Original blew out the light. Timberline, chuckling softly, joined them at the door. The two helpless men were swiftly propelled across to the alder thicket where the horses waited. Zang and his bodyguard — for such the captors judged the second man to be — were helped to saddles; Timberline and Rogers mounted behind them, and a wide circuit of the little settlement was made before the road to the valley door and Tisdale's beyond was resumed.

When they had ridden a mile from Bar C Ranch Original pushed his horse alongside of the one that was carrying Zang and released the gag from his mouth. The second prisoner was similarly freed. Whistler voiced no word, either of appreciation or of comment. The man was roweled by a burning question which his pride would not permit him to voice. What had Original done with Hilma; where was she now? Was this daring sally into the

Spout — and Zang could not withhold secret admiration for his enemy's boldness — was this but a part with some plan of Blunt's which somehow involved the girl?

Zang Whistler rode through the night to an unknowable destiny with his whole spiritual being coiled back on itself like a cobra ready to strike.

Where the faint loom of the mountains ahead parted to mark the gate out of the Spout Original ordered a turn off the road and into the fringe of heavy pine woods that came down from the eastern slope of the valley. There in secure concealment he planned to await the coming of his reënforcements with the dawn. The prisoners were set with backs to tree trunks, the horses were tethered by their bridles, ready for instant mounting. Original and his companions settled themselves to endure the sharp mountain cold and the monotony of the dragging hours.

Stars paled over the tops of the pines above their heads, and the rosy banners of the dawn began to unfold against somber green. Original, growing restless, began looking at his watch at ten-minute intervals. The road was not fifty yards away from the covert where he

had established the hiding place; momentarily he expected to hear the noise of hoofs which would be Andy Dorson's party swinging into the Spout for the early-morning attack. Finally he could contain his patience no longer. Bidding Timberline and Hank remain with the prisoners, he mounted Tige and pushed cautiously out of the pine thicket on to the road.

The sky was pulsing with a golden and crimson glory, telling that beyond the eastern rim of the valley the sun already was up. It was full time that his men, directed to move their wagons and *remuda* by night to a cache near Tisdale's and swing into the Spout by the Tisdale road before sunup, should be on hand. It was past time, in fact. Ere this, Original reflected, the kidnapping of Whistler and his bodyguard from the cabin at Bar C must have been discovered. Any sort of trailer among the outlaws could readily read the tale told by the hoofs of three strange horses and pursuit was inevitable if it were not already started.

Once again he read his watch; it said five-fifteen. He had just turned Tige down the road in the direction of the valley gate, a mile away, when the noise his ears had strained to hear came faintly to them — a beat-beat of hoofs.

But the pulse beat of the hoofs sounded from the direction of the outlaws' roost up the valley!

Original whirled Tige around on his haunches and dashed back into the thicket of pines. He spoke no word when he came to the circle of seated men, but the look on his face sent Timberline and Hank leaping for their saddles. Original dismounted before the big tree against which Zang and the other prisoner were backed. He spoke to them very quietly:

"Boys, I don't make it a habit to be careless with a gun" — his weapon now was in his hand — "but for the next five minutes any conversation — even so much as a sneeze from either of you — is goin' to drop this hammer."

Now the noise of the approaching horses came to all. Zang's face lightened and an eager light played in his eyes. He grinned wickedly at Original, who stood over him, but the mute round mouth of steel so near his made silence infectious.

A tense moment wherein the hearts of the three invaders of the Spout's outlaw territory raced riotously; another, and the pound-pound of many galloping hoofs passed the pine thicket and grew less as the pursuers swept on down the valley. Blindly they were riding, with no

eyes to what the road could tell them, else already the covert would be smoking battle.

Hardly had Original and his companions caught their breath when sharp on the morning's stillness came a volley of shots from the direction of the outlaw settlement.

"Hark you!" Timberline exploded. "Dorson an' his pore yearlin' idjits took the wrong road — come over the east shoulder by the Bar C road 'stead of past Tisdale's."

"And where does that leave us?" Original added, his lips twisting in a wry smile. "Trapped I 'd say."

CHAPTER XXIII

The morning swift events were going forward in the Spout found Hilma Ring, ten miles away on the lower reaches of Teapot, preparing to flee from the loneliness and the oppression of conflicting doubts which had been ever at her elbow since that day, a week gone, when she had ridden back to her cabin after the encounter with Original in the wild country by Crazy Squaw.

Seven days and nights the girl had been alone, seeing but one human soul and that the liveryman who had brought her horse, Christian, out from town in exchange for the one Original had forced her to mount when he recovered the stolen Tige from her. Seven days and nights had she groped in the dark labyrinth called life, seeking a sure path out of all the bewildering perplexities that encompassed her. The steady espionage of the wilderness upon her — blank, impersonal stare of the mountains by

day and a myriad winking eyes by night — soon would drive her mad, Hilma thought. She had heard her father tell of old trappers down from the Broken Horns who communed with " ha'ants " in every hollow stump and held long arguments with invisible creatures of the forests. Perhaps she would soon be making friends with the Unseen if she remained longer alone; when Hilma caught herself talking her thoughts aloud a cold terror of premonition swept over her.

The girl reviewed every possible course open to her. To return to Two Moons? Then she would be absolutely in the hollow of Original Bill's hand. Some caprice of his had freed her when he caught her escaping from jail; another caprice might just as easily lodge her behind bars. Moreover, Hilma feared she might not be able to hold herself in hand in the event of another encounter with the man. To go to the Spout? Even if Zang Whistler were there — and of a surety he was still in the care of that sheriff with the flaming beard — the girl could not bring herself to a surrender of convenience; only her pledged word pointed to Zang as an accepted master of her destinies.

But one course remained: She would go to

Woolly Annie over on Poison Spider — her father had said the big shepherdess was square — she would go to her, ask her to outfit the sheep wagons that had been the property of Old Man Ring and permit Hilma Ring to throw in her lot with the sheep queen's. Did she not have sheep on Woolly Annie's range? The sheep books she had carried away from the cabin and somewhere lost proved that fact. Woolly Annie surely would not demand proof of possession. Stronger than all practical demands of the hour, however, was the girl's poignant agony of lonesomeness crying to be abated.

So on this morning of golden glory when the Spout first heard the clatter of rifles and the three who had descended the Ladder found themselves suddenly trapped, Hilma Ring hurried her breakfast and gathered together a small bundle of clothes in preparation for the long ride cross country to the domain of the sheep queen. She went out to the corral to saddle the somnolent Christian.

Hilma had the saddle on the horse and was just about to mount to ride him to the cabin door when her eye fell upon three swiftly moving dots against the brown flank of a long hill

off to the west. They were horsemen coming at full tilt toward the cabin. Hardly had she caught sight of this prodigy when the three dropped out of sight behind a swale and over the crest of the divide behind them swept more dots. Hilma counted ten. More horsemen, and they were burning the wind. In a minute they, too, were hidden by the rise of a nearer swell in the land.

She sat on Christian's back puzzling an explanation for this sudden appearance of life and action in the unpeopled spaces. Then, topping the crest of a long slope leading down to her own cabin, appeared the three horsemen in advance. Two of them were riding bent low over their saddles; a third, a little back of abreast, sat stiffly upright and rode somewhat clumsily. Hilma hastily dismounted, sensing that somehow she was to be involved in this hurricane of action. Just as the ten following horsemen appeared on the crest of the hill and a jet of white smoke puffed out before one of them, the three in advance thundered straight into the dooryard.

Two threw themselves to the ground and raced to the side of the third. Him they dragged without gentleness from his saddle.

Even as the man fought futilely and with hands held stiffly before him, Hilma recognized the features under the flapping hat brim. It was Zang Whistler. His hands were manacled.

With a gasp she leaped inside the door and her hands seized the heavy beamed barrier of slabs to slam it in the faces of the three. But before she could achieve her purpose Whistler was catapulted through the doorway. The man who propelled him with viselike grip, in shirt and trousers, was Original Bill. The third man, unknown to Hilma, leaped to the saddles and withdrew from their scabbards two short rifles; then he, too, was shouldering his way into the cabin.

Bang! went the door; the heavy beam was pushed through the staples. That instant a white splinter of wood leaped inward from the near side of the door and a tiny bit of blue sky peeked like an inquisitive eye into the cabin.

"Take that front window there, Timberline!" Original shouted, "an' hold 'em off while I fix up Zang here."

Beyond the first flash of recognition that had passed between the range inspector and the girl as he was rushing the outlaw through the door, Original had completely ignored her presence

during the tumultuous seconds after his invasion of the cabin. Now he had wrestled Zang to the floor on the far side of the interior next to the fireplace, and with incredible swiftness he was throwing about the outlaw's threshing legs binding nooses of a hair rope he had slung over his arm the instant of his leap from the saddle.

The close confines of the log-walled room roared with the discharge of a rifle. The gaunt figure of Timberline Todd, crouching at a corner of one of the windows flanking the door was enveloped with wreathing smoke; his right elbow jerked pistonlike as he threw a fresh shell into the chamber of his muley. Faintly came the sound of shots without.

Original, slipping the final knot that bound his captor's legs, heard a metallic click behind him. He threw a hasty glance over his shoulder. Hilma, standing a few feet behind him, was just raising a rifle to her shoulder; its octagonal snout bore down on him. He caught a flash of bared teeth and the cold eyes of murder laid against the rifle stock.

The man acted quicker than light. He threw himself on his curved back, driving one booted foot at the rifle muzzle. His heel struck

the barrel the instant death jetted from it; a bullet flattened against the stones of the fireplace and dropped within two inches of Zang Whistler's head.

Original was on his feet like a cat. As Hilma's right hand swung the ejector he closed with her. His grip was upon the rifle, one hand below hers on the barrel, the other tightened like a steel clamp across her hand at the breech.

They battled. It was crude, primitive combat. Gone were restricting conventions laid by the ages against man who fights with woman. Sped were all the subtleties of sex and the niceties of chivalry. The man, with enemies outside the door and an enemy within, was moved by the single impulse of self-preservation. He fought to live. The woman was driven by hate, — by a consuming passion to wipe out the wound to her pride this man had given with his kiss in the wilderness. No thought of loyalty for Whistler, her lover, prompted Hilma; she had no idea of securing his freedom by attacking his enemies.

Hand grip to hand grip, this was an issue between Original Bill and Hilma Ring, — alone.

With a vicious twist Original wrenched the rifle from her hands. Up shot her right hand before he could imprison it and four red slashes leaped from eyes to chin across the man's face.

He laughed, but there was no humor in that laugh. Now he had an arm about her waist, and her right hand was gripped in the vise of his fingers. She felt his muscles straining against hers. His breath was hot upon her cheek. Slowly, slowly her right arm was being brought up behind her back.

Hilma writhed and her left hand, clenched, beat at his eyes, pounded on his cheek. Something deeper and more consuming than the rage in her whipped her body to exert almost demoniac strength. For through the mist of battle her brain read clearly that in the issue she herself had forced — in the test for which she alone was responsible — this man was inexorably imposing his mastery over her. He was breaking her; all the rebellious and self-centered creature called Hilma Ring was being crushed in the press of crude force.

Now burning pains began to shoot up the tortured right arm. It seemed packed in burning coals. Surely in another instant bones would break.

Hilma screamed, and her nails drove at Original's face. He quickly buried his unprotected eyes against her shoulder so that she could not reach them. Once more the girl heard a low laugh.

Then she vented a tremulous sob and pitched forward in weakness. A cloud rushed down and enveloped her. She felt herself dropping into nothingness.

Original let the girl's body slide to the floor. Then with strips from a dish towel he securely bound her hands behind her and tied her feet together. He carried her to one of the bunk beds, laid her therein, then swiftly made a barricade before her of the table set on edge, the trunk and a bundle of blankets. A bullet zipping through the walls or windows would be stopped by these obstructions.

Original's combat with the girl had occupied hardly a minute and had been observed only by the helpless Zang, lying with his back propped against the fireplace. At its swift conclusion Original seized his own rifle and took his place at a window covering the corral and wagon shed some thirty yards from the house and in the direction of the creek. Timberline, at his post, had been steadily firing whenever a mark pre-

sented itself; the pile of brass shells at his feet was momentarily growing.

The stand of these two, Original and Timberline, in Hilma's cabin was, in truth, the recourse of desperation following an escape more than miraculous from the trap in the Spout. There while the attack of Andy Dorson's blundering cow-punchers was in full swing — and Original could only hope for an outcome favorable to the invaders — he had determined upon the bold stroke of making a break for freedom out of the south pass. With Zang's burly bodyguard left behind, but clinging desperately to the prisoner he had risked his life to get, Original and his two companions had pushed down the road to Tisdale's. There had been a running fight with the crowd of horsemen that had passed their retreat; Hank Rogers had been shot out of his saddle; the outlaws had been beaten back. But, with Zang transferred to Rogers' horse and flight into the open country begun, the outlaws had been quick to rally for pursuit. Hilma's cabin Original had seized as a citadel fortuitously thrown his way after a heart-breaking pursuit across country.

Two against ten; the odds were heavy. Both men well realized the chance of relief by

their companions of the Spout expedition was one in a thousand. But the gaunt old range man and the little inspector each possessed to the full that calm fatalism that was the endowment of men of their clan, inured to the chances of the Big Country.

They were quick to appreciate that certain elements played with them. The cabin looked out upon unbroken prairie through two windows at the front and one at the eastern end; its back and western side were without windows, but equally without a second door to be rushed. The only possible cover offered the attackers was that of the corral and stable whose open front faced the cabin.

It would have been simple for the Spout men to slip up on the blind side of the cabin and fire the roof, but such tactics were denied by the presence of their leader, a prisoner, in the house. A rush could only be made across the flat dooryard swept by the fire from two windows.

As long as there was only one answering rifle from the cabin the outlaws risked circling their horses, Indian fashion, at about a hundred yards from the log fort and taking flying shots at the window whence Timberline's rifle spoke.

But when the smoke of shots began to jet from the second window to the front and one horse went down in a kicking sprawl, the attackers made a rush for the cover of the corral and shed. Sure of their ultimate triumph, they settled down to siege tactics. They could well afford to wait until dark; then the house would be rushed.

It was a deadly game played there in the wide spaces of the prairie. Timberline at his window, Original on his belly behind a hole he had dug out with his knife through the clay chinking between the logs, strained their eyes at the distant cracks between the boards of the shed. Whenever by so much as an inch something cut the thin strip of blue sky showing through, the rifle of one or the other probed that substance with a bullet. Instantly from the shed wall answering puffs of smoke sprouted, and the thud of a bullet sounded against the heavy logs. All the windows were long since splintered; glinting shards of glass lay thickly over the cabin floor. Now and again there would be a smart " ping " of a missile that had ripped through window frame or between logs and found lodgment within the cabin. Once there was a clear bell stroke; the painted like-

ness of the Minnesota State capitol across the glass of the clock's pendulum case dissolved into dust.

Zang Whistler, bound and manacled, sat propped against the fireplace stones, silent. A saturnine smile seemed fixed on his features. From the bunk behind the barricade where Hilma lay there was not a sound.

Original found his cartridges running low. Remembering the rifle he had wrested from the girl, he started on hands and knees on a search for ammunition to supply that weapon. Just as he was lifting himself cautiously toward a shelf where he had spied some paper cartridge boxes he heard a sharp metallic snap and, turning his head, he saw a round hole through the side of the blue zinc trunk he had upended to protect the girl.

He stepped quickly to the bunk where she lay and peered over the top of the pile of stuff there. In the shadow was the girl's face turned toward his. Her hair, tumbled in the fight, lay like a glory all round her head. But the eyes meeting his did not flash the defiance he expected. Instead there was something in their blue-black depths wholly startling to the man, — something of dawning wonder and a

groping for light in strange environs of the spirit.

"Are you hurt?" Original asked.

"No," she answered hardly above a breath.

A long sigh sounded behind him. Original whirled in time to see the gaunt tower of bone that was Timberline Todd slowly buckle and come slipping down by the window frame. His head as it fell back showed a round red spot just over the eyes. One gnarled hand fluttered for an instant as it touched the floor. It was as if Timberline were waving good-by.

"Old friend — old friend," Original muttered chokingly as he placed Timberline's battered hat over his face. Then with Hilma's rifle and three full boxes of cartridges he took his place at the chink in the logs close to the floor. The slow siege went on, odds ten to one.

Hilma, lying on her bound hands in the dark bunk, heard the slow, steady pound of Original's rifle as it spoke defiance through the dreary hours. Though she could not see the sprawling figure of the cabin's lone defender because of the barricade he had piled to protect her, her mind visualized him a giant speaking with thunderous voice, — a giant beset by

jackals and fighting desperately for life against great odds.

"He is force! He is power!" a voice seemed to whisper to her, a strange voice never before heard by her inner ear of the soul. "If he fights this way to save himself, how would he battle to protect one beloved by him!"

Came a moment when the girl realized the pulse beat of Original's rifle was stilled; she could not recall how long had been the interval of complete silence in the cabin. Cold terror struck at her heart. Painfully she worked herself to an elbow, thence to a sitting position which brought her eyes over the top of the barricade.

She saw Zang sitting, back against the fireplace, with his head turned to bring his fixed gaze on something beyond. Following this gaze, her eyes fell upon a sprawling figure against the wall.

It was the man who had mastered her, muscle against muscle. He lay like one asleep, head across the tip of the rifle and pillowed on an arm. From beneath his body a slow black stream pushed out across the cabin floor.

Then the cabin door was cautiously thrust half open. A revolver's wicked snout slowly

peeked in; a man's head followed, then his body.

"Come on, boys," he called back through the door, "we got the cuss at last."

CHAPTER XXIV

EIGHT ruffians pushed into the cabin; one lay wounded behind the shed and one was dead. Zang they hailed with heavy oaths until a snarling command from him bade them respect the presence of the girl, unguessed by the outlaws and received as a distinct sauce to the situation. One man pawed through Original Bill's pockets and found the key to the handcuffs; he released his leader. Another cut free the wrappings of cloth about Hilma's hands and feet. He roughly helped her to rise from the bunk.

A grim and ugly place was that single room, still reeking with the fumes of battle; all the hideous detritus of violence lay scattered there. High-booted men with rifles stumped clumsily about the floor, marking with pointing fingers the scars and chips of bullets' work; their heels crunched shards of glass with every step. Empty brass shells slithered over the floor be-

fore every shuffling foot. Bedding, trunk and table that had been a barricade were kicked into an ungainly heap.

None paid attention by so much as a passing glance at the two sprawled bodies by the far wall.

Zang, freed, made a tentative step toward the girl. But, unseeing, she passed through the crowd of men and came slowly to the place where Original Bill lay, head across the rifle. As one walking in hypnosis Hilma moved, and dully she looked down at the black head pillowed on the crooked arm. A full minute she stood thus, bereft of impulse, seeming numbed against all impression from the trash of bleak tragedy about her.

Then husks that had stifled and sealed against every impulse save a selfish one these many years of her soul's hermit isolation dissolved in a great sob, and the heart of Hilma Ring winged free.

She knelt by the side of the man who had conquered her and took his head in her arms. She whispered softly: "My man — my man!" Her voice crooned like the voice of a mother in cradle song. Her free hand fluttered about the white forehead, tucking back a black raven

wing of hair that had fallen across the closed eyes, touching with infinite tenderness four angry marks her nails had left across the cheek such a short time before.

"My man — my man!" It was a cry now — a cry to call him back to her love.

The nearest outlaw turned and looked down in amazement. He grinned and cast a covert glance at Zang Whistler even as he nudged his companion, who was snorting in a chuckle. Zang pushed his way through his men and came to where Hilma knelt. A heavy scowl smudged his features at what he saw; then when recollection of the fight between Hilma and Original of which he had been a helpless witness, flooded on him the scowl was replaced by blank astonishment. He bent and touched the girl's shoulder.

"Hilma — what — what ——"

"Oh, he still lives! I can feel his heart beat." The girl's hand had slipped inside Original's shirt. She withdrew it and looked aghast at what marked the white fingers. "Some water!" she commanded.

Zang, still grappling with questions he could not answer, brought water in a basin. Hilma already had torn strips from her dress. See-

ing her struggling to pull the unconscious man's shirt away from the wound below the heart, Zang got out his knife and cut away the cloth from shoulder to waist. The man's great torso was exposed; an ugly looking blackened hole bored through the white flesh on the left side. Hilma dipped cloths in water and began to bathe the wound. All the while she kept whispering in mother tones to the ears that could not hear, — disjointed, passionate heart calls they were. Whistler was a thousand miles out of the scene.

The big outlaw realized this after a few moments. From somewhere out of the deeps of his heart a curious sense of delicacy rose up to check the questions he would ask. He tiptoed back and pointed to the form of Timberline Todd where it lay beneath the window. Four of his men picked it up and carried it out of the cabin.

An hour Zang waited while men were busy with a shovel up on the flower-blown knoll where the clay on another grave, that of Old Man Ring, still was fresh. There they buried Timberline Todd, a fighter who had come to his rest as he would. Then, the sun being low and Whistler having grave doubts as to how he

would find the affairs back in the Spout, he felt the urgency of action. He reëntered the cabin.

Hilma, who was sitting with Original's head in her lap, looked up at the sound of the footfall.

"Help me carry him to the bunk," she said. Zang put his hands under the limp shoulders, Hilma lifted at the knees and they laid him on the blankets. Then the girl turned to face Whistler.

"You 'll get word to Woolly Annie for me," she said softly. "Tell her what 's happened — that I 'm alone. Ask her to come and bring some food and medicines, and have somebody ride to Two Moons for a doctor."

"But, Hilma, you 're not — you 're not goin' to stay here all alone with a man who may —die?"

"He shan't die, and this is my place — by his side to nurse him back to strength." Then the girl saw the deep pucker of utter forlornness and blasted hope between the other's eyes; for the first time realization came to her of Zang's right to know what was his part in this swift shifting of the balances. She came to him and put her hands on his shoulders.

"I love this man, Zang — love him more than I know, and I must fight for his life because it belongs to me. Yes, yes," she answered the question that was rounding his lips, "I know you saw me fight him — saw him try to break my arm. That 's when I began to love him, Zang. I can't explain it. Maybe if you had ever fought me — wrestled with me, Zang — tried to break my arm — maybe then I would have loved you. I —— "

"Did Original steal you from the jail and have you hid out?" the big fellow demanded with a sudden access of jealousy. Hilma's eyes widened.

"Steal me — no! I ran away from the sheriff's house because I thought I was arrested; then I stole Original's horse and started for home. He found me when I was lost and — and put me on the right road and left me. All the time you were in jail."

Zang slowly shook his head and smiled wanly.

"It 's a mix-up, Hilma, — a whale of a mix-up. But it seems to be comin' out right for you, leastways. If I 've lost you, girl, reckon it 's because I did n't savvy how to rope an' brand a wild one like you. Kin I —— "

She gave him her lips, simply, and the man went out into the sunset.

That night was the first Hilma had ever known in her years in the Big Country when the great dark did not come to sit down with her. She was alone, yes, but with a deep well-spring of love to flood her heart with happiness and make each ministering touch of her fingers a healing balm.

Morning brought Woolly Annie with her booming voice hailing from afar: "Here comes the nurse, an' the preacher which you need more 'll be trailin' 'long directly."

During two weeks Original Bill battled to free himself from a land of shadows. And in those two weeks history was made in the Big Country. The army of the Invasion recruited among the wild desert towns of the Southwest moved up from the south, launched itself into the range lands, smirched the smiling country with some cold murders and even prepared to lunge at Two Moons. But Uncle Alf, fiery evangel of his army of righteousness, and the more practical Red Agnew armed Two Moons and sent an avenging force out to meet the hired terrorizers. The fight and siege at T A

Ranch, of which the oldsters in Two Moons still spin yarns, smashed the invaders and broke the back of the cattle clan. For all time thereafter the Big Country became everyman's land and not the fief of the cattle barony.

As for Zang Whistler, when he rode back to the Spout that day from Hilma's cabin it was the beginning of a ride into exile. For Original Bill's expedition had, in truth, cleaned up the Spout even without its little general. Zang himself narrowly escaped the capture that fell to the lot of most of the outlaws who had beleaguered Original in the cabin on Teapot. Zang drifted to the Southwest, where there yet remained adventure for the untamed.

It was the first day Original had been permitted by the domineering Woolly Annie to crawl from his bunk to the door. He sat there in the flooding sunshine, gazing off to the purple ramparts of the Broken Horns. Hilma sat on the step below him. Her golden head, color of dandelions in dew, was laid on his knee. One of his hands strayed through the fugitive tendrils that dropped over her ears.

A great content was theirs. They were one with the bluebonnets that flecked the sweep of the divides with royal color; one with the

mourning dove whose love cry sounded from the alders fringing Teapot. They were all children of the Big Country.

Away off to the north a dot topped a divide and disappeared; in a minute it bobbed over the crest of a nearer wave of land, coming in the direction of the cabin. Original's eye followed the vagrant moving thing curiously.

"That might be the doc, though he said he was n't comin' back here for a week," he mused.

"No," Hilma corrected softly. "I think I know who it is. It 's Uncle Alf."

"Sho!" exclaimed Original in mock surprise. "How come your eyes are better than mine?"

"They 're not," the girl laughed. "It 's the heart tells me, boy. And besides, I told the doc to send Uncle Alf out here because — because ——"

Original's hand, suddenly tucked beneath her chin, tipped up her face so that her blue eyes, deep and slumberous with the love in her, must meet his.

"Li'l' girl, once you stole my hoss — my fool li'l' hayburner Tige — an' I let you go. But what am I goin' to do when you figger to

steal me — with the preacher burnin' the wind to put the brand on to me? Answer me; what chance have I got?"

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